DOCTOR WHO
NOVELLAS

GHOST SHIP

KEITH TOPPING

GHOST SHIP

Keith Topping

First published in England in 2003 by

Telos Publishing Ltd

61 Elgar Avenue,

Tolworth, Surrey KT5 9JP, England

www.telos.co.uk

ISBN: 1-903889-32-4 (paperback)

Ghost Ship Š 2002 Keith Topping

Skull motif Š 2002

Dariusz Jasiczak

The moral rights of the author have been asserted DOCTOR WHO word mark, device mark and logo are trade marks of the British Broadcasting Corporation and are used under licence from BBC Worldwide Limited.

Doctor Who logo Š BBC 1996. Certain character names and characters within this book appeared in the BBC television series DOCTOR WHO. Licensed by BBC Worldwide Limited

Font design by Comicraft. Copyright @ 1998 Active Images/Comicraft 430 Colorado

Avenue # 302, Santa Monica, Ca 90401

Fax (001) 310 451 9761/Tel (001) 310 458 9094

w: www.comicbookfonts.come: orders@comicbookfonts.com Typeset by

TTA Press, 5 Martins Lane, Witcham, Ely, Cambs CB6 2LB

w:

www.ttapress.com e: ttapress@aol.com

Printed in India

123456789 10 11 12 13 14 15

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data.

A catalogue record for this book is

available from the British Library.

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out or otherwise

circulated without the publishers prior written consent in any form of binding or

cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition

including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

Contents

Prologue 7 Chapter One 11 Chapter Two 19 Chapter Three 28 Chapter Four 34 Chapter Five 39 Chapter Six 47 Chapter Seven 52 Chapter Eight 58 Epilogue 63

Ghost Ship is dedicated to the very lovely Robert Franks, David Howe, John Molyneux,

Jason Tucker and Michelle Wolf.

And all of the other lost souls on the good Queen Mary.

Past, present and future.

The time is out of joint. O, cursed spite,

that ever I was born to set it right!

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, HAMLET

PROLOGUE

THE VOID

Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass

stains the white radiance of eternity.

PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY, ADONAIS

THE VOID IS VAST.

An eternal and impenetrable, endless, unbroken rolling blanket of nothing.

No light in the darkness.

No form, no substance, no colours, no meaning.

The Void had become my home. In the philosophical sense, as well as the literal.

And what a spectacular realm it seemed to this weary and jaundiced traveller. There were times when it seemed lamenting and mournful, yet it possessed the curious otherworldly wonder of immaculate symmetry. Like a fossil, it could not age or wither or die. It simply existed, for all infinity, in the now. Here was a place where time and space and relativity had no substance beyond the limits of a fertile imagination.

A de facto conceit that they shared with all those other useless elephantine scientific concepts that tiny minds, chained by the bondage of polite convention, cannot possibly dream of comprehending. In the literal sense, as well as the philosophical.

The bewildering beauty of complete insignificance.

Here is a small trick to get you thinking on a whole new level. Imagine yourself at the centre of an enormous crowd, of one million

people. Then imagine that you are, all of you, trapped within a single grain of sand. One of millions upon millions of grains lying on a single beach in which every grain contains a million souls. Now multiply that beach by every other beach on the planet Earth and the figure that will emerge when all your calculating is done may be somewhere close to the total number of inhabited planets that exist in the universe.

Sometimes mathematics can be quite heart-stopping.

Try it. It will, I guarantee, make you feel very small and vulnerable as you lie in your bed in the early hours of the morning, in the darkness just before the coming dawn, thinking about whether size is really that important.

For out there, in the vast unchanging eternity, the great unknown, there are signs and wonders the like of which most people can only dream about.

Then there is the silence of the Void. A mirror to the soul. As deep and dark and mysterious as any of Earths many oceans. The silence that, at this moment, was broken only by my awareness of the sounds of my own body. My twin hearts beating out an unnatural, jagged and erratic rhythm.

A torch song to my solitude.

Here, for the first time in what seemed to be forever, I was completely alone.

When you are telling a story, it is often said, you should strive for lucidity, for elegance and a distinctive voice. This applies to any sort of tale from an epic saga to the shortest of short verses. From Gothic romance to a mood piece to an engine of destruction, told around a village fire to an audience of enraptured children. The rules are made to be broken, but it is said to be unwise to use a metaphor or a simile that is also a cliché, and that you should never use long words where short ones will do just as well, or ten when three are perfectly adequate. I am aware that I, myself, am guilty of both the latter crimes.

The writer and humorist Hugh Leonard is once said to have described his profession as less a vocation than an incurable illness. Those who persevere, he wrote, do so not from pluck or determination but because they cannot help it.

And so the story begins.

Sometimes I wish that I could take it all back and start again. To be a fisherman in a Cornish village like Mousehole or Mylor or Mullion Cove with nothing to worry about except my nets and my lobster pots and the raging, terrible sea.

To be a trooper in John Lilburnes Levellers or in the New Model Army perhaps, to fight for causes that are just. Or to explore Orwellian political futures. To have the language of poetry and iambic pentameter impinge upon the voyages of my TARDIS.

To go anywhere, to any location, but here.

What a vile thing it is, to remember, and to regret.

With hindsight, which is always a wonderfully dangerous toy in the hands of the uninformed, I know now how this catastrophe began. How these events all fit together and how the whole picture is supposed to look on the lid of the jigsaw box. But such an awareness does not dissipate the clinging sense of guilt. On the contrary, it only multiplies it and reflects it back upon me, engulfing me like a shroud. Condemning me.

Mistakes are a luxury I have never allowed myself in the past.

They are the cause of untold suffering for everyone.

Drifting in the faceless infinity of the space/time vortex, the cracks between the seconds that help to define the limits of the universe, such as it is, the TARDISs internal telepathic circuits seemed to have detected my lingering mood of melancholia and introspection after my recent, and troubled, return to my home. To Gallifrey.

It had never occurred to me, before this moment, just how empty the TARDIS could seem without the babble of young voices and the clatter of feet upon smooth corridor floors. For so long, companionship had been an important and unchanging part of my many lives. Now there was only the hum of instrumentation as my constant companion.

And the many memories.

Perhaps the old girl herself was looking to be occupied again. To be complete.

I had been brooding for a long time, I am now compelled to admit,

upon the true nature of fate. Of what it is, what it means and whether it even exists. And of whether any foreknowledge of the Masters diabolical schemes would have enabled me to save the lives of the President or of Chancellor Goth, that wretched pawn in the Masters wicked games. It was not, and is not, and will never be a simple equation, I was forced to conclude. Such questions as these are never solved easily or without the price of some personal regret. That, like the Void, is a universal constant.

A necessary constant.

So I sat and stared at the blank canvas of eternity. Lost, mute and blind, in a never ending pocket universe of my own imaginings.

Until, that is, the TARDIS became intolerant of my self-indulgence and decided that enough was enough.

Time, it is often said by those who know about such things, or claim to, looks after itself. I was still thinking about the circumstances that had drawn me into the web of mystery and intrigue in the Capitol. This twisting bridle path of morbid self-analysis was abandoned, and suddenly. The TARDIS was dematerialising.

I sat bolt upright in plain surprise. I had expected to drift aimlessly for a good while longer.

Subsequently I would, on many occasions, regret not instantly leaping from my chair and resetting the location controls for somewhere else. Somewhere specific. Or anywhere but the place to which the TARDIS had actually brought me. But my lethargy and gloom needed a tonic. That was certain. And in those following seconds, when I rationalised that a single random element may have been lust what the metaphorical doctor ordered, fate sealed itself.

The TARDIS had delivered me to the most haunted place on Earth. I realised this only with hindsight, of course. And hindsight, as well as being dangerous, is also something in which I never indulge myself lightly or wantonly.

For hindsight is a luxury of those who never have the need for the velvet embrace of adventure.

Ah, sweet adventure. It shall surely be the death of me.

The wood-panelled console shook and juddered, perhaps in anticipation of what would happen next. It trembled like a nervous

mouse approached by a predator. I wondered, briefly, as I always did at such times, to which planet or satellite, in which constellation, in which galaxy I had been delivered. The computer did little to enlighten me, which, again, was not unusual. Location unknown it told me in lurid green symbols. The air was breathable at least.

The scanner, likewise, told me nothing that I did not already know, showing only a bare patch of white painted wall. Without another thought as to the consequences, I operated the door mechanism and prepared to find out to just where in the universe I had been delivered.

It was just another day in a different place. My life in microcosm. Taking a deep breath, as I always did on such occasions, I stepped outside.

CHAPTER ONE

ONCE UPON A

MIDNIGHT, DREARY

What is a ship but a prison?

ROBERT BURTON, DEMOCRITUS

I HAD NEVER CONSIDERED MYSELF A NAUTICAL COVE. I FELT THE motion long before my eyes had become accustomed to the dull, funereal light. It seemed that I had come to a gloomy and mournful place, which was never, frankly, a good sign. The trace of a smile formed itself, if only for an instant, upon my lips. The old girl knew me only too well, it would seem.

But what manner of place was this?

Within seconds my senses had felt the vibration of engines that caused the movement of the floor beneath my feet, heard the shunting of distant, well-oiled pistons and the hissing of compressed steam, both smelled and tasted the atmosphere that was thick with the pungent, caustic aroma of sea salt, and seen the opulence that surrounded me.

I was on a ship.

A grand, majestic, ocean-going ship.

Through a porthole to my left I looked out to see a huge and sad-faced moon hovering mere inches above the crashing waves, casting a languid and rippling silver shadow upon the surface. It was such sights as these that had convinced the mariners of the ancient past that if one were to sail too far to the east or the west from the known world then one would reach the ends of the Earth and fall off into the endless chasm beyond.

And a magnificently imperious conceit it was, held proudly as scientific fact in the hearts and minds of all men of learning and wisdom, good men these, and some desperately bad ones as well. Until, of course, that rotten old spoilsport Ferdinand Magellan led an

expedition that circumnavigated the globe, and everybody suddenly knew so much better.

I hate it when that happens, dont you?

Are you never tempted by the lie, my friends? Simply to accept what everyone else believes and never to question with your head what your heart knows full well to be true?

Life is not about certainties, whatever those for whom doubt is a foreign land may try to convince you of. Its a lack of answers that drives the engines of the mind.

A clock to my left was chiming.

Eight. Nine. Ten. Eleven. Twelve.

I looked around, observing the shop fronts that occupied the space surrounding me. My foot clomped satisfyingly on the hard wooden deck beneath. I took a penlight torch from my pocket and shone it above my head.

Behold, illumination.

W.H. SMITH & SONS, NEWSAGENTS. MESSRS ILLBODE, ROMAINE & CLINKER, TAILORS OF

FENKLE STREET, LINCOLN.

J.&D. COOPER, TOBACCONISTS. ESTABLISHED 1894.

FETCHCOCK, AMBLER, BUCKNELL & GRIMES, FANCY FOODS AND HOSIERY.

FRED MURRAY AND MICHAEL SORE, COBBLERS TO THE QUEEN.

One of the deck boards, its nails perhaps loosened by the TARDISs arrival, creaked and groaned beneath my feet like the bones of an old and arthritic man rising, unwillingly, from his chair. I stepped into the foyer in which the TARDIS had landed and, as the space widened, found myself on carpeted flooring. Red carpets that had once been deep and lush but were now, through the passage of countless pairs of shoes, faded and thin. They led to a stairwell to my left, all bright shining brass rails and velvet-lined wall panels. I looked back at the TARDIS, which, for once, appeared to be completely incongruous resting next to the newsagents shop in the main foyer. The light was

better here, a distant chandelier banishing the murky gloom from even the darkest corners.

Something caught my eye on the floor and I stopped to pick it up, my hand touching the smooth, well-trodden carpet. It was a ticket stub and, with the information it contained, I knew the exact location to which I had been brought. The Cunard ocean-going liner the Queen Mary in October 1963, sailing from Southampton and bound for New York City.

The apprehension that had been growing steadily within me over the previous few moments that I might be trapped onboard the Titanic or the Lusitania some fifty years earlier, flooded away.

There were, seemingly, no disasters lying in wait for me here.

The high-pitched scream seemed to rip the fabric of the air in two. A piercing cry of terror in the depths of the night. As I heard it, the skin on my arm prickled. A dull, growling voice inside ordered or to get back in the TARDIS and leave this place at once. An ever-present pessimist who accompanied me throughout my journeys.

I did my best to ignore him. I always ignored him. Even on the odd occasions when he was right.

A second scream. Slightly louder. More terrified. More urgent.

It was a womans scream.

Racing to what I imagined would be a bold and heroic rescue, I reached the corner from whence the sound had come, only to find a lengthy corridor leading away from me, completely empty. I was somewhat at a loss as to what to do next. Should I begin knocking on doors?

Whilst normally I would have allowed nothing to distract me when rushing to the aid of what my mind had decided was clearly a damsel in distress, such was my state of inertia that, for once, I temporarily hesitated and held back, waiting for something to happen.

As I paused, I felt a presence behind me.

Danger.

There was a sweat on my back. A thin film soaking my shirt and chilling my skin.

I turned, both hands raised defensively, half expecting to find myself facing some monster from the worst imaginings of a fevered brain. A Dalek. A Cyberman. Something green and nasty, dribbling with ooze and about to kill me.

Instead, there was a small man with dirty blond hair wearing a stewards white coat and a rather bemused expression on his face.

I realised, after only a few seconds, that the reason for his perplexity was standing right in front of him. Me.

This was not an unusual reaction, I am forced to admit. I have not the faintest idea why I always seem to provoke such abject curiosity amongst those that I meet on my travels. Perhaps it is just that I am an exceptional fellow? Who, in all honesty, can tell?

Still, at least he did not seem to wish to do me injury or violence, which put him several steps higher up the ladder of civilisation than a nasty green oozy something-or-other.

I withdrew my hand from my pocket and extended it towards him in a gesture of trust and, hopefully, friendship. Jelly baby? I asked.

He waited for a moment, seeming bewildered, and then took a red one.

A man of taste, clearly.

You, bein a man of the world, will presumably know what they use for the colouring in the red ones, he remarked.

Im sorry? Half my mind was still on the scream that had brought me here.

Jelly babies, he explained.

Yes, I replied flatly, cochineal. The dye is made from the crushed bodies of tiny Mexican beetles. It may seem strange now, from a distance, but at the time this conversation about confectionery seemed to be the most natural thing in the world.

I always thought that was a right old cock-and-bull story, the steward replied, but they all reckon its true, dont they? He smiled. Thank you, sir, he said with the traces of a nasal Scouse accent buried deep within a fine Cockney facade that he had obviously built for the sole purpose of acquiring a job in such surroundings. I prefer the little boy babies

personally, he noted. You get more jelly that way.

I returned his knowing smile. Im the Doctor, I said. I dont believe weve met.

Simpkins, sir, he replied by way of introduction. Youll see me around. He paused, and I could tell that he was still trying to make up his mind about my clothes. The magician from the ships cabaret? he asked, clicking his fingers together. It was less a question and more a statement of fact. I did not reply, so as not to shatter his illusions. Doctor Svengali, Master of Mesmerism, Prestidigitation, Chicanery and Sleight-of-hand, right? Go on then, show us a trick …

I thought I heard a scream coming from this direction, I said, neither confirming nor denying the identity with which he had provided me.

Yes, I heard it too, Simpkins confirmed. One of the toffs having a nightmare, I expect. I wouldnt worry about it. If they need anything, theyll scream again!

And, at that moment, they did. This scream was loud enough to open the graves of the dead and persuade them to walk. It was coming from a room three doors further into the corridor.

Its Miss Lambs cabin, Simpkins told me, matter-of-factly.

Finally, I roused myself. We should go and see what … And then I stopped. I didnt need to say anything else, because both of us were thinking, simultaneously, the same thing. To see what vile spirit of hell was causing such demented cries.

Courage is not, I reflected then, something that you can buy at the newsagents. Not even a good one like W.H. Smith & Sons.

Simpkins moved purposefully towards the door, his pass key in his hand.

I followed.

The screaming stopped, suddenly. He looked at me nervously. We should probably go in, shouldnt we? he asked. There always seem to be more questions than answers in situations such as this. Have you ever noticed that? I agreed. We should.

Its all right, Miss, soothed Simpkins, as he held the terrified womans shoulders straight and looked into her wildly dilated eyes. Theres

nothing here.

She was sitting up in bed, the moist cotton sheet still pulled up to her chin, her eyes still as wide and mesmerised as they had been when we had burst through the door moments earlier to find her in a state of high anxiety. She continued to shiver even now, like someone caught outdoors without an overcoat on an unusually inclement day.

It was, she sobbed. There. A finger pointed in a direction behind her. A place where she would not look. Towards the cabin wall and the porthole.

I moved to the spot that she had indicated and looked through the porthole. Outside, the night was freezing cold and as black as the moon having vanished behind a thick bank of cloud. A shroud of darkness seemed to press itself against the glass, threatening to push its way into the room and suffocate those that it touched. I found that I, too, was shivering.

The womans hysteria was slowly beginning to subside. She had clearly been the victim of nothing more than a bad dream, I rationalised. As Simpkins continued to calm and reassure her, I looked at a luggage tag casually discarded on a small and elegant writing table in the corner of the cabin. Irene Lamb, it said, followed by a smart address in Belgravia.

I turned, with a half-formed query struggling for release. I looked at the woman. If I had been human and interested in such aesthetic concepts as beauty then I would have been obliged to find her strikingly beautiful. She had short dark brown hair.

And her eyes, also deep brown, contained hints of a hidden loneliness behind them. I asked the obvious question and then immediately wished I had not.

What did you see?

A ghost, she replied, in a lucid, tranquil moment amid the maelstrom of distress within which she was trapped. It was there. I saw through it.

A ghost? A transparent one at that? Oh, really …

Its gone, I noted, without adding that I did not believe it had ever been there in the first place. Such rationality was something best left for the cold light of a new day.

Simpkins stood and picked up a fine woollen cardigan from the dressing table. Youre ice cold, my ducks, he said, slipping the garment around the womans shoulders. She looked up and gave him a watery smile, wiping the remaining tears from her eyes. Try to get some sleep, he continued, making for the door and indicating that I should go with him.

Itll all look better in the morning.

Yes, she said. Better in the morning.

She did not look at all convinced.

Simpkins stepped outside and I followed, giving Miss Lamb a final, slightly concerned glance before I left the room. I felt a bit of a fraud, having been of no help either in calming the woman or in finding a reason for her traumatic experience. Pleasant dreams, I said.

It was a fatuous comment, which did not receive the withering sarcasm that it richly deserved.

That was … interesting, noted Simpkins in the corridor.

Who can explain the stuff of nightmares? I asked, feeling stupid and ill-equipped for such a debate, particularly here and now. I spoke the words simply to ensure that the conversation did not drift to a conclusion on such a sour note.

If it was a nightmare, of course, said Simpkins with a cheery grin that belonged in a different situation entirely. Youve surely noticed how cold this ship is?

Now he came to mention it, I had. But that was something for which I did have a rational explanation.

Were in the North Atlantic in October, I ventured. Its hardly the Tropics.

Thats what I thought, he replied. At first.

I was curious. There was an unspoken yet dreadful implication that his opinion on this matter had now changed. I followed him to the end of the corridor. He jangled his keys, put them in his coat pocket and cast a glance in both directions as though what he was about to tell me was a secret never to be repeated. I drew closer and asked my question in a conspiratorial whisper.

You have another explanation? I was keenly aware of just how ridiculous this query sounded. Rationalism, a good and treasured friend to me over many years, waved a little white flag of surrender and then wearily crawled off in search of a bed for the night.

Simpkins nodded, the cheerful smile gone from his face and replaced by something harder. He gave me an enigmatic look that could have been surprise at my ignorance or contempt at my inability to grasp the blindingly obvious. If Simpkins thought that I was a gullible fool, ripe for a piece of japery, he didnt show it. There have been many rumours, he began.

Rumours? I interrupted, incredulity rising within me. I knew exactly in which direction I was being led.

Theres some as say that this ship is haunted, he continued at last. A ghost ship,

he added with a slight quiver in his voice.

I was, I am now forced to admit, dismissive. Contemptuous, almost. I can remember telling Simpkins that I did not believe in such things. In ghosts and ghouls and things that go bump in the night. And that I never had. Or would. In my many travels I have witnessed numerous occurrences for which I can offer you no rational explanation, I continued, before Simpkins had the chance to produce his supernaturalapologists credentials in full. But that does not mean that a rational explanation does not exist for them. It was a terse and unbecoming statement.

Simpkins said nothing. He merely shrugged in a laconic way that suggested a lack of interest. Or, perhaps, a mind that was already made up on this matter.

I have never believed in ghosts, I repeated. As much, I suspect, for my own benefit as for his.

You will, Simpkins said at last as we walked back towards the place where the TARDIS had landed. In particular he seemed keen to warn me about a specific cabin on the ship. It took me a moment fully to grasp what he was saying, and I asked him for further details.

Simpkins seemed lost for words; surprised perhaps, that I did not simply take what he was telling me at face value. Why should I not believe him? After all, I was the stranger on board. Dont go to Cabin 672, in the First Class area, he said at last.

Deck four, near the grand ballroom. That room is never occupied. Even when the ship is full to bursting. Something terrible happened there once and now no-one will enter it.

His words seemed to be mocking me. Making light of the difference between things that are known and things that are unknown.

Something terrible? I repeated, contemptuously. Would you care to elaborate?

You know how some places just have a feel about them? Simpkins asked in reply. I indicated that I did. When I was a kid, right, he continued, there was the copse near to where I lived in Birkenhead. You didnt go there after dark. Its impossible to explain why, you just didnt. And everybody knew this, the old, the young and them that was in-between. It was a bad place. He paused. That cabins the same, and all the tea in China and all the bananas in Jamaica wouldnt get me in there. Know what I mean?

Yes, I did.

We came to a bulkhead door and stopped. I pressed my hand against the smooth, gun-grey metal.

Theyve got razor-sharp edges for a watertight fit when they close. Obvious when you think about it, noted Simpkins. Theyre shut at high speed if a section of the ship has to be isolated, like if we get a hull-rupture. Back in the war, when the crew did practice sessions, some of the lads used to play chicken with a door, and see how many times they could jump from one side to the other before it slammed shut. I hear tell some unlucky sod got caught by the door once and lost his leg. And thats not the worst story Ive heard by a long way.

There was a resonating sadness within Simpkinss voice, something I had not previously noticed in his jovial, cheeky-chappie persona. If he, like most humans, had a melancholy side to him, he had hidden it well up to that point. But it was unmistakably there, marbled in his words like a layer of archaeology, mere inches beneath the surface.

Do you ever wonder sometimes if its all worth it? he asked me, suddenly. I caught a flash of something darker and troubled hiding behind his eyes.

Im sorry?

You know, the whole kit and caboodle? I dont know, this place.

Sometimes it depresses me. And theres no end to it. We sail on and we sail on, and nothing ever changes or gets any better, do you know what I mean? I was about to sympathise with him when he seemed to pull himself out of his momentary depression, and returned to the tale of the notorious Cabin 672. A bursar went mad in the room in 1938, mid-voyage, Simpkins noted. They reckon he was starting to scare the passengers, so they locked him down in the dark with the engines, until they reached New York. When they got there, he was found dead, so he was. He had, literally, been frightened to death. Simpkins paused. Not for all the tea in China, he repeated, wagging his finger at me. There was that hint of sadness, of loneliness, of a troubled, weary man again.

The story was a good one, even I was forced to admit that. Though the penny-dreadful style of some of its telling left a little to be desired. More a cod Algernon Blackwood than the chilling skill of an M.R. James at his peak. Dickens, of course, would have been proud of such a yarn.

Its nonsense such as this that has filled Miss Lambs head full of her notions, seemingly, I told him. But despite all my misgivings about Simpkinss story, and I had plenty, something about the ship disturbed me greatly. As I bade my new acquaintance good evening, that nagging voice inside me was telling me that I had been witness to something unnatural.

For once, I was ready to listen to it.

CHAPTER TWO

ILL SAIL THIS SHIP ALONE

We are fools of time and terror.

Days steal on us and steal from us.

LORD GEORGE

BYRON, MANFRED

MOODS ARE CURIOUS AND AFFECTING. THEY CAN BE FUNNY things. Funny peculiar, that is.

Having left Simpkins, my mood was one of sombre introspection. I was distracted by the events of the evening and by some ill-formed but lingering doubts in the back of my mind as to the purpose of my being in this place. At this time.

Not that every adventure to which I am party requires a purpose, of course. Not every story has a beginning, a middle and an end. Indeed, some stories have no meaning, being driven merely by random causality as the cosmic dice-player takes a break for tea and crumpets and forty winks at the absurdity of it all.

I wandered aimlessly around the top deck of the Queen Mary in the early hours of the morning, lost in my solitary thoughts and in the midst of a howling storm. Perhaps it was just my mood, but it seemed to me that there was something almost Biblical about the weather at this time, as the wind and the rain lashed against my face and the ship yawed, dipped and then rose in the enormous churning Atlantic waves beneath.

A line of poetry, written in iambic verse, about a sailors wife and her shipwrecked husband, from Shakespeare or Marlowe or John Donne, was lodged in my brain. But I could not, for the life of me, remember who had written it or, more importantly, how it ended. And that irritated me, as such lapses of memory were always prone to do.

Too much trivial information in there, do you see? Too much for one

head to hold.

With my eyes fixed on the point in the slate-grey and starless sky where I believed the distant horizon would most likely be, I stood my ground, held fast against the elements and waited for the coming of a brand new day. My coat billowed behind me, and the ends of my scarf, which was wrapped tightly around my throat, flapped like the wings of a great bird in distress. I was grateful that, for once, I had left my hat in the safety of the TARDIS, for it, surely, would have been swept away by the tempest.

I found myself thinking about Henry Purcell. He was an interesting and jovial chap with whom I had spent many long and pleasant winter evenings, drinking fine wine from his cellars and eating mature cheddar from his buttery whilst he fiddled with his violin and wrote Arise ye Subterranean Winds. And were they not arising now with their full and majestic might?

Fiddled with his violin? You must excuse the dreadful pun.

I clung, with all my might, to the ships rails, my knuckles bled white by the force, and stared out at the angry black ocean. The vessel on which I sailed felt like a small insect, trapped in a sea of tar, trying to escape from something bigger and more inexplicable than itself.

Here, in this fashion, I brooded for hours. Time lost all meaning in the darkness, until the first indications of the arrival of dawn brought something like peace to the raging waters and calmed the savage winds. As thin streaks of pale, brick-orange light began to filter through what seemed to be cracks in the sky, my solemn mood was temporarily banished.

A new day, with a personality of its own.

But the night had seen me in a bleak and desolate place. In more senses than one.

I was still greatly troubled by those questions of fate and predetermination and, simultaneously, overwhelmed by the sense of impending doom that I had felt earlier in the atmosphere of the lower decks. I could not even begin to explain these feelings, but I had been particularly shaken by the sight of wooden partitions between the Second and First Class cabins as I left Simpkins and looked for a way out. Literal barriers erected to keep out the unwanted. It seemed like a metaphor for my feelings about the entire ship.

Dawn brought, also, a realisation that my salvation lay in a simple act of departure.

The TARDIS, my oasis, was but one deck below me. Just to turn my back on the vicious sea and return to a ship of my own. A safe ship. That was all it would take to banish these feelings of depression forever.

Perhaps.

Oh, if only it were that simple.

The forward bar was a panorama of red velvet and polished oak and gleaming brass fittings. Out of the curved picture window, the view was slightly distorted by a thickening of the glass towards the bottom as protection against decades of North Atlantic storms. The window, still splattered with the final onslaught of the nights bitter rain, offered a view of grey waters, flat and becalmed, stretching away as far as the eye could see. A world in dull monochrome.

I needed company. Badly. I needed to meet people who were young and lively. People who could lift me from the pit of despair and depression into which I had allowed myself to fall. I looked about the lounge, seeing groups of people in small knots, eating breakfast and chatting happily amongst themselves. Those whose faces didnt betray the pale tint of seasickness wore broad smiles. Perhaps they were relieved to have survived everything that the storm had to throw at them. Whatever the case, I needed to reattach myself to humanity.

There was a larger group than most at a central, circular table. Some six persons, the men in smart suits, starched collars and staid shirts, the women in bright summer dresses, hair bands and ankle socks. It was only as I approached them that I realised that one of the group was the lady in distress from the previous evening.

With a self-consciousness that I had not experienced in some while, I made eye contact with Miss Lamb. Her wide brown eyes were as lonely and sad as they had been when we had last met, the morning light having, seemingly, offered her no salvation or sanctuary from the demons of the dark that plagued her. She gave a little half-smile, partly in recognition of me and partly because one of her companions at breakfast, a loud and ruddy-faced man, was just coming to the end of a story. There was some ribald laughter from the group.

I hope you are feeling better, I found myself saying. The night terrors can seem fearfully real. Or so I am led to believe.

Before Miss Lamb could speak, the heads of her five companions all turned, simultaneously, in my direction. I felt like an amoeba under a microscope.

No one spoke for what seemed like forever but was, in reality, mere seconds. There was no formal guideline as to how this conversation should progress. No information.

No rules. I felt that I should take the initiative.

Im very sorry, I said. How desperately rude of me. We havent been introduced properly. I am the Doctor.

Ships sawbones, eh? asked the ruddy-faced man, bellowing a brief and self-indulgent laugh. It was, somewhat sycophantically, followed by five others, including that of Miss Lamb. Then were obviously in safe hands here, the man continued, patting the seat of a spare chair next to him. Please Doctor, wont you join us as my guest?

Oh yes, please do, added a chorus of voices. Formality had been established, it seemed. I sat in the empty space between the man and Miss Lamb. I observed that Miss Lamb did not seem to want to look at me directly. She had, seemingly, found something very interesting on her breakfast plate.

So, Doctor, said the man eagerly. You must tell us of the dire perils that await us over the next few days.

This is my first voyage on the Queen Mary, I answered, truthfully. Im as unaware of what the future holds as any of you.

That brought the conversation to a thoughtful pause.

I feel it necessary that I should apologise for my behaviour last night, said Miss Lamb, suddenly, and still without tearing her eyes away from her plate. What must you think of me? I was aware of a series of curious glances from the others seated with us. What could I say, except to tell the truth? I think youre frightened, I replied. Theres really no need to be. The only thing to fear is fear itself.

Well said, Doctor, added the ruddy-faced man, banging the table with his fork for emphasis. Thats what weve been telling the lass all morning. But would she listen … ? He paused, and smiled with a wholly surprising gentleness at Miss Lamb. Weve all suffered that long dark night of the soul, he continued. Human nature, dove.

Were each of us afflicted by that, even if we spend all our time on this Earth denying it.

They were, I was forced to admit, and despite some initial misgivings, quite interesting people. First impressions are often deceptive, I have sometimes found to my cost. The ruddy faced man was called Bryce. A northern industrialist from impoverished lower-class roots who had made his vast fortune in coal or steel or something that required a process of extraction, purification and production. Despite a boorish laugh, desperately poor table manners and some colourful language, he possessed a gruff, down-to-earth charm that was surprisingly endearing. It was, however, difficult to escape the obvious conclusion that the man was trying to be something that he was not. And, similarly, it wasnt hard to imagine how those to whose position in society he aspired would have regarded him. As a charlatan. A rich vulgarian with New Money, a few acquired social graces and an obscenely obvious pretence towards sophistication. But people who hold such views are the kind that one usually crosses the room to avoid at swanky dinner parties.

I, on the other hand, liked Bryce enormously. He called a spade a spade.

Two of his fellow travellers, Deekes and Illingsworth, were members of his company board. Young and eager sharks. Bright university boys with cunning minds who knew when to laugh at the bosss jokes, when to shut up and when to strike like a cobra. I would have hated to have done business with either of them. Both had wives, Jessica and Rachel, respectively, decorated like Christmas trees with ostentatious jewellery.

Glittering prizes, to be shown off to the watching world. Yet they, like their husbands, had the keen intelligence to know when to say the right thing. And when to say nothing at all.

And then there was Miss Lamb, as seemingly out of place in this company as I was.

They were all going to New York to strike an important deal. They could have flown, they admitted. Air travel would actually have been cheaper and certainly a much quicker and a more efficient use of their company resources. I was forced to wonder why they were spending such huge amounts of money and time on the journey. Its a once in a lifetime experience, Bryce said. Something about the phrase caused me to begin shivering again.

You value that which is unique, singular? I asked.

Bryce nodded eagerly. Life and how you live it, he noted obliquely. Youre put on this Earth for a damned limited time and youre full of misery for most of it. Like a flower you riseth up, says the prayer, and like a flower youre cut down.

In the midst of life, we are in death, et cetera, Illingsworth added quickly, seeming to know this gospel according to Raymond Bryce like a well-rehearsed play.

But, First Class? I ventured, taking a bite from a bread roll. A symbol of status rather than taste, Ive always found. Wouldnt you agree?

Illingsworth seemed surprised by the question. He started to say something, stopped, and then looked at Bryce as if seeking his mentors guidance. With a slight inclination of the head, the older man encouraged his protege to continue.

Money is the root of all evil, he said with a thin smile. At least thats what it says in the Good Book. But, you cant take any of it with you, can you?

It wasnt at all the answer that I had expected. If truth be known, I wasnt sure exactly what I had expected to hear in reply. Then why … ? The question was only half-formed when Bryce interrupted.

The differences? he asked pointedly.

Yes.

Ah, well, there was a long pause and something of a sharp intake of breath, as though this was a conversation he had been engaged in on more than one occasion.

Perhaps, usually, with himself. Thats the way the world spins round. It doesnt revolve around us you know, lad. The world goes around the Sun this bloke called Galileo proved that.

A philosopher and renaissance man, clearly. Bryce that is, not Galileo.

I smiled, Then let me put it another way, I asked. Why should First, Second and Third Classes of berth exist in a post-Galilean society? It was only after I had said it that I realised that berth might also be heard as birth. Bryce had spotted it too, and had a ready answer for me.

Now thats a question worthy of Conditions of the Working Classes in England, he noted. Oh, Ive read my history, Doctor. Not to grammar school standard, maybe, but afterwards. Always dead keen on the Romans, so I was. They knew how to build decent real-estate, them lads. Provided full employment for the people too. Thats something your average socialist like me can never manage to do outside of the confines of his head, and thats a fact. He paused. And, do you know why? Because the world will never be rid of lazy people and scum no matter how much we like to think that it will. Choices, thats what its all about.

The choice to do nothing isnt a valid one? I asked.

Ive been described as a self-taught intellectual, usually by John and Jerry here and their college-pudding mates on the board, replied Bryce. But its not true. Not in the slightest, because, do you know what, in my own mind I was an intellectual when I were but six years old. I just didnt know what the word meant!

Clever. Again, I smiled warmly, indicating that he should continue.

My old dad, now, he was a riveter in the shipyards. He worked on tankers and big cruise liners like this one, grafting away on the causeway in all bloody weathers. In the winter, he used to come home and have to sit in a tin bath for three hours in near boiling water just to thaw out. Big man. Big hands. Good heart. Spent all his life building ships that went all around the world but he, himself, never went anywhere. Except for France. Fought for his country in a war that he didnt understand the causes of, and didnt much care about. Him and his brothers and all their cousins. They just pointed their guns in the direction that the generals told them to, shot lots of Germans, survived the gas attacks and the hand grenades and the barbed-wire and the mud. Then they all came home to a land fit for heroes to live in one bedroom tenements with the wife and ten children. He paused. I know just how lucky I am to have been born when I was and where I was. And I know how lucky I am to have left behind what I did.

It was an impassioned speech, and a good one. You dont like wars, I observed, and Bryce shook his head, sadly.

No lad, I dont. People get killed in them.

Another point in his favour, clearly. Did you serve yourself? I asked.

Bryce was expecting the question and nodded with a resigned sigh. If

you can call it that. North Africa. Desert tank division, Montys boys, you know. We fought against Rommels Panzers. When I say we, I didnt do a lot of it. I was nineteen and scared.

First day I saw a German tank lumbering into view I dropped my load and ran away like buggery. But I came back. God knows why. I didnt understand what it was all about.

Oh, for sure, I knew that we were fighting against a bunch of goose-steppers who wanted to kill me and rape my sister and drink my beer. At least, thats what the propaganda told us. But Ill tell you something, I said at the end of all that malarkey, Never again. And I meant it, too.

Not all wars are worthless, I suggested.

No, youre right there, Bryce said with a heavy regret. And to be fair to the lads we were fighting against, they probably thought the same way about us. First coloured chap I ever met were in the desert. A Sikh lad. I asked him why hed come all the way from one desert to another to do some fighting when he could have stayed at home and done it there, and he said it was because he wanted a world where his ten year old son didnt have to get up at four oclock in the morning and go to work in a mill, or a mine or something. I forget what it was now. Were back to Conditions of the Working Classes in England again, arent we?

What happened to him?

Bryce shrugged. Havent got a clue, he replied. Never saw him again. Probably got killed. Lot of us did. Not me though.

He was trying to sound cynical and dismissive, but Bryce, I knew, was as affected by the ramifications of his own private war as much as every man is. Engels ran a factory in Manchester that employed mostly child labour, you know, I noted.

Aye, he were a hypocrite and a scoundrel that lad, and no mistake, Bryce said. And anybody who isnt both of them things at least once in their life, well frankly, theyve never lived!

My point is one of perception rather than experience.

Yes, I agree with all that, he answered. The real question should be why is it that those in Third Class, for example, are happy to be in Third Class when they could be up on top with us? Its a moribund argument, you know. Like the Amateur Sprint and the Gentlemen

versus the Players. As obsolete as warships in the Baltic.

Then Bryce paused again, aware perhaps that his voice was rising slightly. He immediately apologised to the ladies for having brought grim politics to the breakfast table. Sometimes I forget Im not in the boardroom all the time, he told me, turning his attention momentarily away from his colleagues.

I placed my napkin on the table and stood, bidding them all good day.

A pleasure, Doctor, Bryce noted through a mouthful of bread-crumbs.

Once again my eyes came into contact with those of Miss Lamb, which were filled with involuntary tears. Without another word, I turned my back on them all and left.

Some time later, I found myself returning to the forward bar after the breakfasts had all been served and the place was virtually deserted. The weather had continued to take something of a turn for the better and most of the passengers who would normally be spending their entire trip in this place, faces pressed miserably to the glass watching the churning waves, had clearly decided to make the most of what little ocean sun they were likely to see.

As many passengers strolled on the decks, I found a quiet corner, took a seat and picked up a discarded copy of The Times that I found lying nearby. It was from two days ago, the day of embarkation. And, judging by its dog-eared and shiny state, it had obviously been read many times by many different people.

I lost all track of time as I read items of varying degrees of interest. Discussion of the resignation announcement of British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan. The aftermath of the disastrous bursting of a dam in the Piave Valley, Italy. Obituaries of Jean Cocteau and Edith Piaf. Eventually my eyes fell upon a small article on page nine concerning the latest British scientist who was, it said, about to join the so-called brain drain to America. Doctor Peter Osbourne, a maverick quantum physicist, was, the report continued, looking for a financial backer in the United States to help him build an experimental time machine after his government grant in Great Britain had been cut. I must admit, the paragraph amused me greatly. Not particularly the bit about the time machine but, rather, the arbitrary and very pointed use of the word maverick. I knew from a lifetime of personal experience exactly what that was supposed to mean in this context. Such a phrase had been used often enough about me on my home world and

elsewhere. A pound to a penny, hes a very brilliant and very lonely man, I muttered to myself.

After an hour of so of pleasant distraction, I was leaving the lounge when I had another brief encounter with Simpkins. He gave me a jovial, if somewhat conspiratorial, smile, which managed to irritate me, and introduced a fellow steward named Jarvis. He was a thin and sickly pale-looking man with a sharply pointed face and lank black hair that flopped in a fringe over one eye.

No more emergencies like last night then, Doc? Simpkins asked. No, indeed. I had breakfast with Miss Lamb. She seemed much improved, I lied.

Simpkins nodded. Jarvis did too. They clearly came as a double-act. So, did you encounter any more visitations around and about the ship? Simpkins asked I sighed, deeply. I thought I had made my position on such phenomena clear when we last spoke, I began, but found that I didnt have the heart to continue ranting at him. I felt weary, as though the exertions of the dead of night had finally caught up with me. I slumped into a chair beside the door, the energy in my body sucked from me like the juice from a lemon. Simpkins sat beside me. Terrible things have happened on this ship over the years, he said. Many terrible things. Suicides. Mysterious deaths. One time, right, an explosion ripped through the lower decks, killing dozens of soldiers when it was being used as a troop transport during the war. And on, and on, and on he went, hardly pausing for breath whilst his friend, Jarvis, occasionally butted in with an affirmation that it was all true. Every word of it. Simpkins was fascinated by death.

My head was spinning with information. Horrible, overwhelming, useless information.

After a few moments I could stand it no longer. I dont believe in ghosts, I said, dismissively, as I stood up. Such stories have no basis in reality. Theyre full of sound and fury but they

signify nothing. I paused, and in that second, I felt something within me grip me by the throat. Something deep and long-buried that had been suppressed by centuries of logic and reason and dogma. I dont believe in ghosts, I repeated in an almost inaudible whisper.

Nevertheless, when I left the lounge, I was chilled to the bone. Literally, as well as metaphorically.

Outside, in the lengthy and empty corridor, I stood with my back to

the polished, oak-panelled wall and closed my eyes, breathing in and out slowly and relaxing, trying in vain to clear my troubled mind of appalling images of burning soldiers, slashed wrists in tiny bathtubs and bodies hanging limply from light fixtures. After several seconds of welcome isolation, I opened my eyes again, hoping that all these imagined horrors might have packed up their kit bags and just gone away.

Instead, to my amazement, an ill-defined apparition floated through a cabin wall in front of me.

And that was very odd because I dont, actually, believe in ghosts.

CHAPTER THREE

DEAD SOULS

For it is a ghosts right, his element is so fine, being sharpened by his death, to

drink from the wine-breath,

while our gross palates drink from the whole wine.

W.B.

YEATS, ALL SOULS NIGHT

THE APPARITIONS VISAGE WAS EXACTLY HOW IT WAS SUPPOSED to appear from within the realms of popular fiction. Of urban myths and oral folk tales of phantoms and ghosts.

From down the aeons on many worlds and in many cultures. Spectral, indistinct, almost like an image drawn by fingers in smoke.

I was, I freely admit, terrified, if only momentarily. A repulsion from the hard-headed scientist within me rose to a shouting crescendo of outraged disbelief. This is not real, I found myself saying. That is often the last refuge of the foolish.

But if this were an hallucination, which was the only alternative, rational explanation available to me, then it was as vivid and real as any I had ever witnessed or heard about. I repeated my assertion of the unreality of the situation several times, like a mantra. Like a stylus stuck and locked into the groove of a gramophone record.

Denying reality was, I reasoned, something that had worked successfully for me in the past.

But I was convincing no-one. Least of all, myself.

And a part of me desperately wanted to know more. The adventurer. The dreamer.

Perhaps I am over-exaggerating my wish to know more at this point it is difficult for me to be certain that I was merely curious, because I expected that I should be curious. I am the Doctor, after all. This is what I do.

My trembling hand stretched out towards the spectre and, in the fraction of a second between me touching it and it being touched, it vanished as suddenly as it had arrived. I stood motionless, rooted to the spot and staring at the place just two feet from me where it, whatever it was, had once been. Finally I roused myself from my stupor and crossed the corridor to touch the wall where my ephemeral visitor had first appeared and then disappeared.

It was just a wall.

Solid.

Tangible.

Utterly real. My knuckles scraped over smooth hard wood, polished daily. I could see my face reflected in it. My puzzled, bemused face.

The wood was, I noticed, cold to the touch. Like the ship itself.

Just as the immediacy of the experience was beginning to fade in me and I was attempting, with some initial success, to rationalise the entire experience as a by-product of an overactive imagination, I turned. And, in the half-distance, I saw the unmistakable form of my visitor floating down the middle of the corridor away from me.

The hairs on the back of my neck stood up straight to attention as if affected by static electricity. This time, I could not only see the spectre but also feel its presence. My skin reacted badly to the invasion of my personal space, and I shivered.

What are you? I asked in a voice that was unsteady and emotional.

There was no reply.

I repeated the question, feeling strange and inarticulate. What was I expecting in reply, I now wonder?

It is what it is, and was, and shall be.

Once again, the vision was gone in a blinking.

To a bare patch of corridor I repeated my demand for the third time. What are you?

A terrible, lonely silence was my only reply.

The visitations then continued all over the ship wherever I wandered, and my apprehension increased with each successive sighting. Sometimes they were very ill-defined, almost wisps of cotton-wool cloud passing briefly through the periphery of my vision either to left or right, to become lost in the labyrinth of corridors and rooms. On other occasions there were forms that I could almost recognise as human.

With arms and legs, torsos and faces. Still little more than afterthoughts, like the negative image from a photograph, two-dimensional and translucent, but with substance.

With meaning.

And, also, with a curious, disarming smell. A caustic, pungent, sickly sweet aroma that reminded me of burning rope and rotting skin, but also rosemary and oranges and wet autumn leaves. Not unpleasant, exactly, or disgusting, but unsettling in the way that a strange smell in an unusual context can often be.

Whatever that meaning was, I had to know more.

The dam had now been breached and I was a party to this reality.

As I wandered down corridors, occasionally passing real flesh-and-blood passengers, barely acknowledging their presence as I withdrew into my own head, there were questions that I could not help but ask myself.

Was this, perhaps, an after-effect of my experiences within the Matrix on my recent visit to Gallifrey? Those images, too, had seemed frighteningly real at the time, but had subsequently proved to be illusory. Was it a delayed reaction to the stress and strain that my mind had been forced to endure? Was it, perhaps, even more serious than that? Had I even left the Matrix at all?

But an idea even more horrible than these possibilities was percolating in the back of my mind. There was an old Time Lord myth, a chilling bedtime tale for children, about a surfeit of time travel causing a diseased mental state akin to the human condition of delusional or hallucinatory schizophrenia. Could it be that this was something other

than a story? That it was actually true, and that I was becoming a victim of it?

Could it even be, I wondered painfully, that my many travels thus far in my lives and times could have, literally, brought me to the brink of madness?

To indulge in such forced introspection is most unlike me. I am, I believed then and still believe now, afraid of very little, in real terms. But it is a foolish man indeed who is afraid of nothing. We all need something to be scared of when the lights go out.

So, the apparitions continued wherever I ventured on board the Queen Mary. While some appeared as mere fleeting spectral flashes, others were powerful and terrifyingly strong images. Screaming skulls that loomed suddenly at me from out of the walls and from the shadows of the dark corridors. The first such appearance made me cry out in terror. I pressed my sweating hands against the smooth-panelled corridor walls, which felt even colder to the touch now. Suddenly the whole ship was like an ice box. A damp and tangible chill wrapped itself around me, refusing to relinquish its tight grip upon me.

I breathed out slowly, trying to recover my composure, and my breath was visible to me, like a thick cloud of fog.

And there the terrors finally found my breaking point. I was reminded, briefly, of an incident in a darkened, shadowy French church in the 14th century. Of fleeing from frighteningly strong visions of devils and demons summoned to plague me by a particularly powerful narcotic present in the dye in the drapery. Deliberately so, it had turned out. But there were no Knights Templar on this ship, playing evil mind-games with my psyche.

I ran. Blindly, wildly, away from things that I cared not to speculate on the origins of. I could ponder on the whys and the wherefores later, I told myself, but for now, I had to be rid of these terrors that dogged my every step.

Until, in a corridor on the third deck, alone and afraid, I was overtaken by the visions. They trapped me, cornered me in a cul-de-sac from which there was no escape.

A skull swam before me, inches from my face. It seemed to me that its dead eye-sockets, black and vacant, were staring back at me with

curiosity and some pity.

Again, I wanted to touch it, to feel its substance sliding beneath my certain fingers.

I resisted the urge.

Communication seemed to be the obvious next step. The only step.

I tried to converse with it verbally.

Hello! Im the Doctor, I said. It felt inadequate and rather pathetic.

There was no reply.

Please try to talk to me, I said, a degree of panic evident in my voice. I mean you no harm. I only want to help.

DOC-TOR? The voice was in my head rather than external and from the apparition. It was low and guttural, and seemed stripped of any corporeal existence. A voice from beyond the grave. From the very depths of Hell itself.

The fact that the apparition could communicate with me at all made me jump. I gave a strangled yelp of surprise. But there was satisfaction in my cries too. This was a step forward.

Hello, I said again, as brightly as I could under such circumstances. Can you tell me who you are?

DOC-TOR? repeated the skull, seeking confirmation or assurance of my identity.

Thats right.

I was calm by now. Calm, lucid and balanced. Surprisingly so, given the shock that I had initially felt. But this was what I was supposed to be good at. First contact.

Being friendly. Doing the right thing.

My mind was suddenly in another place. Several different other places in fact. Having a lengthy bedside conversation with Emile Zola concerning remorse, redemption and regret. Standing on a jagged and windswept rocky shore with William Golding, looking silently at an angry ocean. Scrambling across a blasted planetscape as menacing, fox-like creatures scurried around me. Spending a day in Calcutta with

William Thackeray, observing the decadence and snobbery of the English abroad and finding, in humour, something to celebrate in it. Gazing at glorious incandescent rainbows in Malmesbury with Thomas Hobbes. Enjoying a Hong Kong sunset, on a stone wall overlooking the shallow harbour with a group of semi-drunken sailors, all happy to be alive after a cannonball had pierced the hull of their ship and threatened to sink it. Discarded, scattered memories. Frozen moments. Fragments, like photographs from someone elses album that had somehow found their way into my own.

Why was my mind playing tricks on me like this? Or was it that someone else was rooting around in the hidden cupboards and dark places of my subconscious?

Please, I continued, as much to myself as to the ghosts. I really would like to help if I can. You seem much troubled.

No help, replied a womans voice, less harsh and dreadful than the previous one.

Were two entities occupying the same space? No light. No sound. No end.

Now I was really confused.

Would you care to elucidate?

The skull seemed to regard me for an eternity. No escape, the female voice finally continued. No light. No sound. No end, it repeated.

You are trapped?

It was a wild and pleading stab in the dark. The skull seemed to be telling me that it was imprisoned. But where? On the ship? I asked, remembering Simpkins and his friend and their gory chamber of horror tales of ghosts being absorbed into the very fabric of the ship itself.

Perhaps that was the explanation for Simpkinss well-disguised sadness?

No sound, repeated the skull in what seemed to be a third different voice. This one was male, older, with a distinct West Country accent. And then it was joined by others. A trickle at first. And then a rush, a deluge, as if a tap had been opened.

Dozens. Hundreds. Thousands of screaming voices filling my head to the point of bursting. All telling me different things, and yet the same thing. All of them shouting above the incredible cacophony in a vain effort to make their single voice heard. The penetration was deep and wounding and, as it reached my larynx, I found myself mouthing the words that were bombarding me.

No light. No sound. No end.

Where? I managed to gasp in the cracks between the voices. There was no answer.

Tell me, please. I cant help you otherwise, I shouted. Youre killing me.

A picture formed in the depths of my subconscious, and I was seeing the world through the dead eyes of the skull. Or rather, of the skull and a multitude of its companions, too numerous to count. All showing me variations on the same view, but from thousands upon thousands of marginally different perspectives. They came to me simultaneously and I had to cry out, the pain was so great. Reality shattered. I was caged, imprisoned behind an impenetrable barrier. I felt crushed and broken as a melange of multiple identities, all trapped under glass, merged together in me. The fractured, mutated shades of light, seen through the glass, were unmistakable.

The world was warped. Bent out of shape.

For a second I thought that I was in the forward lounge again, looking across the bow of the ship and out to sea.

But this glass enclosure was thicker. And smaller. Shatter-proof. I felt the airlessness, the claustrophobia, the terror that saturated the air around me. I was on the inside of a glass prison.

Where? I gasped again, as the visions retreated and my grateful brain cried out in relief at being released from this bubble-world. The skull remained, hovering, but now the corridor was filling with blood. Rivers of blood, oceans of blood. Drowning me. I closed my eyes, tight, against the assault.

Help us. It was a different voice and, when I opened my eyes again, the skull had gone, replaced by the figure of a child, a girl of no more than five or six years, wearing a tattered dress and standing before me with a look of bewilderment on her face. Help us, she repeated, and I found myself unable to look away from her pleading eyes.

How? I asked, and the girl pointed to the far corridor wall where the most truly horrifying vision of all was waiting for me.

A message, written seemingly in the blood that had rushed towards me, was scrawled across the cream wallpaper and onto the door of one of the cabins. We are damned,

it said. We are lost. We are forsaken.

Youre not helping me very much, I cried. If you dont tell me what ails you, then Im not going to be able to suggest a cure.

The child disappeared and a disembodied male head, terrified eyes bulging in their sockets, replaced her. He was of rough-shaven face and with a severe crew-cut. A soldier, I guessed. I cant feel my legs, Sarge. Im scared. Its dark in here and I cant feel my legs, he whispered at me, as if in confirmation of my suspicions.

Its dark, and its cold and were all going to die. I dont want to die. Then he, too, was gone and the child was back, this time clutching a translucent teddy bear to her see-through chest. You have to help us, said the little girl. Youre the only one who can help us. We are lost.

Where? I asked, for what seemed like the hundredth time.

The message written on the wall had changed. My hearts skipped a beat, sank, slipped to the floor and shattered to smithereens. It was the answer that I had been expecting, indeed dreading, for some time.

672, it said.

CHAPTER FOUR

CABIN 672

If the doors of perception were cleansed,

everything would appear as it is.

Infinite.

WILLIAM BLAKE, A MEMORABLE FANCY

EVERY INSTINCT WITHIN ME TOLD ME NOT TO GO TO THE CABIN. My body resisted with every nerve, every fibre, every sinew. But, despite that, despite rationality and common sense and all the other things that are supposedly designed to stop us from doing stupid, illogical things, still I went.

Why? Put simply, I felt compelled by overwhelming forces beyond my control. Silly, isnt it? I was drawn to Cabin 672, bodily, like a moth to the flame. I had tried to walk in the opposite direction. Really tried. To get up onto the ships deck and see if the fresh air and the daylight would help to banish these non-existent ghosts from their haunting of me.

Because I knew, knew for certain, that none of this was in the slightest bit real. At least, not in any sense of reality that I believed I understood.

But every step just seemed to lead me closer, closer, closer to Cabin 672.

Even when I knew I was drawing near to the cabin, I was unable to stop myself.

Eventually, with a stony lack of enthusiasm, I found myself at the head of the very corridor that led to the cabin. It was similar to the corridor in which I had experienced the earlier onslaught of visions: a U-shaped trap from which, once ensnared, there was no escape.

I shambled unwillingly. Slowly. My feet dragging through the carpet

like those of a small schoolboy on his way to the headmasters office.

The ships architecture seemed to mock me and my sorry plight. Taking on almost hallucinatory properties, the corridor elongated, stretched out before me to infinity and beyond. I was accompanied, as I had been all day, by a thumping sound. At first I believed it to be nothing more than the ships massive steam engines in close proximity to me. But now I deduced, through a process of elimination, that it was the sound of my own heartbeats.

I finally reached the door of Cabin 672. It looked so desperately ordinary. No looming beasts. No entrance-guarding demons. No alien tentacles snaking from under the door. Just a room, like any other room.

That was, until I inspected it more closely.

I placed a hand, somewhat nervously, on the doors brass knob and felt the sensation of thousands upon thousands of tormented souls, screaming at me simultaneously. All urging me to leave this place. To turn, to run and never to return. I removed my hand, quickly, with a startled cry. Looking down at it, I found that it was still shaking. Tingling, as if with the after-effects of an electric shock.

I tried again, this time touching the wood of the door frame rather than the knob.

The effect was exactly the same. Indeed, if anything, it was stronger. A terror-inducing ride through dimensions of agony and torture. The voices were all indistinct, but you do not need to be an expert in unknown languages to understand when someone really wants you to know what it is that they are saying. I backed off to the solid comfort of the far wall and stared at the locked door for a long time, thinking about Edgar Allan Poe and The Tell-Tale Heart and dreading what manner of fiend, what monster, what thing could be hidden behind there.

I was trapped in amber. I could not go forward and I could not go back. My legs turned to treacle and I watched, bemused, as they seemed to melt into the floorboards.

I tried to speak, but my tongue was tied. Was this to be my eternal prison too?

A disembodied face appeared in the doorway of Cabin 672. It seemed to drift through the solid matter and, once outside, to congeal, with a

sucking sound, into a recognisable shape. Solidity from the mist. Ordinarily, I would have been startled by such a manifestation, impressed even. I considered applauding the trick. But I was getting quite used to such occurrences by now and passed it off with a shrug.

The ghost was berating me for my cowardice.

I stared at the pinched and sour-looking face, and it stared back at me defiantly, eyes wide, mouth leering, a grin of sadistic satisfaction etched upon it. It appeared to be a woman in her forties, wearing severe spectacles and a look of manifest discontent.

Men are all a bunch of weak and helpless bastards, she said, angrily. Never prepared to make the right decisions. Always willing to look for easy answers.

I didnt disagree. Indeed, given my present situation, that sounded like a pretty good idea to me.

I hate you and all your kind and every solitary little thing that you all stand for.

All three billion of you in your male Kingdom of Right and Majesty. I spit upon your tarnished, beer-stained throne. What else can we expect from a disgusting collective mass of lowlife, no-conscience gangsters like you? You and your whole sex. Id throw you in the sea for all the decent world to watch you drown and cheer as the bubbles rise and your thrashing stops. Men with your groping and drooling and enslaving and laughing, indulging the same tired and worn-out misogynist urges until the final second of time.

Have you quite finished? I asked the woman, who merely scowled back at me. Her face, beneath her jet-black hair drawn back in a tight bun, was red, angry and agitated.

Not being human, I didnt feel the need to defend mankind. But, within a blinking, the womans face was replaced by another. A man with a deep, gaping wound in his neck, livid scarlet against the white of the rest of his manifestation. You dont belong here, he told me. No-one belongs here. Except us.

Who are you? I asked again, my voice cooperating with me at last.

We are many, he said. We are endless. We are we. I shook my head in confusion.

We exist, he continued, to tell you what you are doing is wrong, even if it is right. We are the ones who whisper to you in the night as you drift between the waking and the dreaming. We are the spiteful piece of grit in your shoe that cannot be shaken free. We are the lying thieves who steal your peace and quiet and continue to torment you until you can take no more. We are the dirty and unstoppable accusations that cannot be silenced or sued.

Briefly the angry womans face reappeared. Remember whose fault this all is, she shouted accusingly. Remember our faces when you close your eyes each night and weep your piteous head to sleep. Remember at whose door the blame lies. Its yours.

Oh, go away you silly woman, was all I could say, annoyed that her interruptions for nothing more than spite had stopped the flow of, potentially, some real information. But I felt very satisfied when I said it and it seemed to have the desired effect.

Now there were more faces, dozens of them. And they all said the same thing.

Go.

Reluctantly, I went.

Actually, no, that is a lie to which I am now fully prepared to admit. I went with total willingness, glad to be away from these hideous, twisted spirits with their hidden agendas and unspoken identities. Angry, jealous tormentors with no thought for the hurt they caused with their hatred and mockery.

I backed away from the door, slowly at first, and then with purpose. I turned and raced away from Cabin 672 as fast as my legs would carry me, heading for the TARDIS.

My sanctuary.

As I tore blindly through the twisting corridors, I passed people, chatting amongst themselves. Or were they, too, ghosts whispering about my ultimate doom and destruction?

Nothing was real, anymore. The whole ship seemed to have taken on the perspective of a malevolent circus show, with grinning clowns and tinkling sinister music. Of sour-faced and bitter people whose anger had not had a proper outlet until now. I felt engulfed by inertia, trapped by a combination of my own reckless curiosity and the most

damning thing of all, the sin of arrogance. And of, unforgivably, being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

The ship had become a huge and frightening environment of dark corners, secret places, of half-heard laughter from behind three-quarter closed doors. Shuttered rooms, empty and dank. It was easy to get lost within the maze of its corridors and function rooms. There were times when, sick with paranoia, I thought that I heard someone in the distance calling my name, but I didnt turn around or break my stride.

I just kept on going at pace, my lungs aching from the exertion. My breath came in many painful spasms as I neared an area that I recognised and rounded a corner to find the TARDIS before me, welcoming and serene amid the carnage and the horror on board this ship.

This ghost ship.

I fumbled with the key, my hands shaking, my fingers numb with the chill in the air.

Finally the key sank, satisfyingly, into the lock and turned. I stumbled, falling gratefully, if painfully, to my knees down the short flight of steps and onto the hard wooden floor of the secondary console room. As the doors closed behind me with a pleasing whoosh of compressed air, I gave an agonised upwards glance at the scanner above my head. It showed a patch of ships corridor and, in the fraction of a second before they disappeared appeared, I observed a gaggle of ghostly images hovering around the doorway shouting incoherent things at me. They may have been mocking my retreat or they may have been pleading with me to stay and not to abandon them to their fate. For possibly the first time in my many lives, that was a mystery to which I had no wish to find an answer.

I tried to stand. My knees were bruised from the fall, my hands red from friction against the wooden floor. I picked myself up, an inch at a time, and rested against the console, my chest and limbs aching from the chase.

At last, my deliverance was at hand.

Relocate, I murmured aloud, and prepared for take-off.

One switch. Two. Three. I pressed the dematerialisation nodule and grasped the sides of the wooden console, preparing for the wheezing

and groaning of departure.

I looked at my face in the shaving mirror attached to the centre of the console. I hadnt realised just exactly how afraid I had become until that moment.

I looked like someone who had seen a ghost.

Nothing happened.

I initiated the dematerialisation sequence again, as I had done a thousand times in the past, only this time more slowly and deliberately to make absolutely sure that the TARDIS would do the simple task that I was asking of her.

Still, nothing happened. I hit the Fast Return switch, in irritation, for the first time in what seemed to be a lifetime or three. Not a flick or a tick. The TARDIS, simply, would not work for me.

I began pressing and jiggling switches almost at random, trying to get the old girl to work, my hands moving in frantic patterns. The TARDIS was lifeless.

Alone in the console room, I began darkly to speculate on what terrible force could have infested the ship in such an all-encompassing manner, held her in this place, against the dramatic and apocalyptic forces of time and relative dimensions. The TARDIS should have been able to break through any force field, any barrier, any obstacle. It was, after all, a space and time machine, a craft capable of travel to the farthest reaches of whatever concepts of universal laws the mind could imagine, and then a bit further, if needed.

I do not believe in ghosts, I said, aloud. I think I was speaking to the TARDIS, now. Trying to encourage her to get a grip on herself and get me out of this place.

I do not believe in ghosts, I do not believe in ghosts, I do not believe in ghosts …

Still we remained, marooned on the Queen Mary, pinned, like a butterfly in a display case. I sank to my haunches, hugging my knees to my chest, my hands bunched in front of my face, tightly. I felt as miserable then, at that moment, as I have ever felt.

I do not believe in ghosts, I repeated. They always, always turn out to be the result of timeslips or anomalies or somesuch. They had always

done in my past experiences, that was perfectly true. I do not believe in ghosts. But I did not sound at all reassured.

This was different from the manifestations at Auderley House, the pulse spirits in the Cave of Horrors on Cassuragi III or haunted castles on the planet of Kambalana.

Vastly different.

With escape no longer a viable option, at least for the time being, I decided that this was clearly fates revenge on me for ever doubting its existence.

Once more, with a heavy heart or two, I opened the TARDIS doors and returned to the ship of ghosts.

CHAPTER FIVE

ATLANTIC OCEAN DRIFT

Alone, alone, all alone, alone on a wide, wide sea!

And never a soul took pity on

me, my soul in agony.

SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE, THE RIME OF THE ANCIENT

MARINER

FRUSTRATED, I WAS LEFT TO WANDER THE SHIP AGAIN, WONDERING if, like Coleridges Mariner, I was to remain trapped within a nightmare of my own imaginings for all eternity. Alone and vulnerable on this ship upon a wide and pitiless painted ocean.

I found myself, once again, at the ships bow, watching the waves. An unrelenting darkness was encroaching on the horizon, threatening to smother the twilight. Another night of troubles and storms was heading our way.

The sky was bleeding, streaks of scarlet scoring the distant horizon beneath banks of swirling cloud. Under this angry, vicious sky came the ocean, the setting suns reflection spray-painting the lapping waters gold.

I was in a highly alert, nervous state that I had experienced on only a few occasions before. There was a slight trembling of the fingers, a quickening of the pulse. Words seem inadequate when describing it now. Perhaps the total response would find its best expression in the chords and harmonies of dramatic music. In a condition such as this, all the senses tend to become heightened. Behind my back I heard the faint noise of pursuit. It was simultaneously the feather-light tread of the panther, the hiss of the blade, the soft and deadly flap of the wings of an angel of death.

I somehow managed not to turn around. To do so would, in ways that border on the ridiculous, have cheapened the clinical perfection of the

moment. Made it less beautiful in its completeness.

Heres a penny for your thoughts, said a bright female voice from behind me.

So transfixed had I been on the surging, frothing and foaming ocean that I had momentarily forgotten that there were, in fact, other people around me. Real people.

Living people.

Thank you, but Im afraid I dont have any change to give you.

I heard soft laughter and finally turned a little light-headedly, so long had I been staring at the azure ripples and spit-white spray. I squinted, my eyes momentarily blinded by the brilliant dying sunlight. Haloed within its luminescence, Miss Lamb smiled back at me and my discomfort. You seemed lost in thought, Doctor.

Lost?I asked, and then coughed, my throat dry and tasting of salt. I was a little surprised at such a perceptive observation. I gave her a half-hearted smile of confirmation. I was looking at the sea.

Magnificent, isnt it? she asked. Untamed. A slave to no-one.

Another interesting observation.

Actually, I was thinking about Samuel Coleridge, I continued.

Miss Lamb joined me at the gnarled whitewashed iron railings overlooking the ships deep bow, and below that, the angry waves. Water, water everywhere yet not a drop to drink? she misquoted with a soft and gentle hint of laughter that was carried away on the wind. Beneath us, the sea seemed to join in with the merriment, its waves swishing and leaping as the ship cut straight through them.

Psssht, fssschwt, psssht, fssschwt.

Psssht, fssschwt, psssht, fssschwt.

Psssht, fssschwt, psssht, fssschwt.

I cleared my salt-lined throat. Like one that on a lonesome road doth walk in fear and dread, and having once turned round walks on, and no more turned his head, I replied. Less famous, I know, but more imaginative. Or more applicable perhaps.

Social comment, surely? asked Miss Lamb. Coleridge was interested in romance and revolution, which is a delightfully dangerous combination at the best of times, wouldnt you agree? He wanted to create something he called a pantisocracy. Which was all fine and dandy, but it came to nothing. Then he got himself involved with all the opium, of course. And that didnt do him an awful lot of good at all.

I did not reply, merely resting next to her on the rails. I returned to watching the crashing waves. But I smiled at her from the side of my mouth, indicating that if I had been feeling so inclined, I could have debated 19th century literature with her for the rest of the voyage and well beyond.

A moment of silence followed, broken, again, only by the sounds of the sea.

Psssht, fssschwt, psssht, fssschwt.

Psssht, fssschwt, psssht, fssschwt.

Psssht, fssschwt, psssht, fssschwt.

I glanced at the woman. For the first time, I noticed that she was wearing a bathrobe and cap and carrying a large, fluffy white towel monogrammed with the ships initials. I wasnt usually anywhere near so unobservant. Clearly, I had other things on my mind. Thinking of taking a dip? I asked, incredulously.

Not in that, thank you, she replied, looking at the sea. Theres a First Class swimming pool on deck four that is very beneficial to general health and beauty. Or, at least, thats what all the brochures say.

Never believe whats in the brochures, I said, speaking from weary experience.

They always tell you lies. Its their raison dętre, so to speak. You seem … I paused when changing the subject, aware that some delicacy might now be required if I were to continue with this line of conversation.

Somewhat less insane than I was last night? she suggested with seemingly needless cruelty. And somewhat more cordial than I was this morning?

I hastily gave her a hot and embarrassed denial as she turned away

from the sea and slipped a pair of expensive looking sunglasses onto the bridge of her nose. The sea breeze ruffled what little of her hair was peeking out from beneath the white rubber of her cap. Its amazing what a day of sunshine can do for you, she continued. You leave the darkness behind, so to speak. In more ways than one. Dont worry, I was just acting like a very silly little girl last night. A flibbertigibbet. Raymond Bryce would have called me a right soft tart.

Yes, I could just imagine Bryce saying exactly such a thing. It amused me almost as much as it seemed to amuse Miss Lamb. And Ill tell you something else, Doctor, hed be just about damn right too, she noted. Its time to grow up, clearly.

Time, I noted, is an abstract concept. Ill accompany you to the pool, I continued, pointing in the direction of the steps down to the lower decks. I could do with a little cheering up.

Poor Doctor, said Miss Lamb, running a sympathetic hand down my arm and taking my hand. Afflicted by the madness around him? A case of physician heal thyself, isnt it?

Ah, but if only it were all that simple, I told her. That seemed to be becoming my catch phrase. What would Coleridge have said about that? Never a soul took pity on me, my soul in agony? I suggested, somewhat fatuously.

Miss Lamb wrinkled her nose as we reached the bulkhead and began to descend the clanking metal steps. Miserable, rotten spiteful old so-andso, she said. No fun those poets. Except for Shelley. He knew how to show a girl a good time. And he did.

Often. He was an anarchist, you know.

I nodded. Indeed. An idealist. A romantic and a dreamer. A man of vision who lived his life in almost unbearable sadness. And he drowned on a pitiless sea just such as this.

Oh, your gloom is outrageous, dear Doctor, Miss Lamb said, squeezing my hand tighter. Cheer up, it may never happen.

Strangely, I did cheer up.

Baudelaire was a particular favourite of mine, I confessed, failing to add that I had spent much time down by the Seine and, come to that, down in the Seine, with the poet and Manet and Delacroix on a hot Parisian summer night of shooting stars, lightning and other, stranger,

lights in the sky.

Another flaming junkie, said Miss Lamb with a cunning smile. And a pretty macabre one at that!

He was just misunderstood, I suggested. What about Tennyson?

Now, he was good, she noted, eagerly. Liked him. But, you know, youve got be in the right sort of mood for it, havent you? All those cannons to the left, right and centre. Not exactly what you want for a quiet night in with a cheese sandwich and the cat. And he had some very grotty ideas about a womans place in the world.

She knew her stuff, did Miss Lamb. I was hugely impressed. Wordsworth? I asked.

Too flowery, she suggested, and giggled at her unintentional joke. Blake?

Mad as the moon. There are some nice metaphors in The Sick Rose but, you know, odd chap! She paused. Miss Franks, my English Lit teacher, would be so proud that Ive actually remembered all this nonsense. She could barely get me to stay awake most days.

Byron?

Oh please, she said, scowling. Come the revolution, hed be the first one Id have lined up against the wall, given a last cigarette and then, you know, horsewhipped to death.

He would probably have quite enjoyed that, you know? I noted, speaking from a keen personal knowledge of the man.

We continued to enjoy a pleasant conversation about the ship and its many features, and about art and culture and the delicious uncertainties of life, as we strolled through numerous decks and passageways. She was a bright and charming, witty girl, Miss Lamb; a personal assistant to Bryce, which seemed to mean, from her description, a secretary, a sounding-board, an occasional big sister and, more often than not, a surrogate mother.

Takes a lot of looking after, does he? I asked.

I think youd be surprised, she replied. A quite remarkable man, is Raymond. With all the childish foibles that such a man is to be allowed in the great scheme of things.

I understood. He likes to be right? I asked.

Yes. And usually, he is. But hes the kind of person who has to be right, even if he isnt, if you know what I mean.

I did.

My mother once told me that I should try not to fall in love with the geniuses. The problem there is that they never want to go to sleep.

As we approached the swimming pool, I felt something that I had not experienced since my earlier confrontations with the apparitions. A sense of impending dread.

I looked quickly around but I could see no ghostly images anywhere.

Were here, Miss Lamb said. Thank you for walking with me this far, Doctor. And thank you for being so nice to me last night. It really was appreciated.

I turned to face her and found myself looking into dead eyes. Hollow sockets, filled with maggots. I gasped, and took a horrified step backwards.

Water, water everywhere …

Miss Lamb was drowning before me. Her arms thrashed about wildly in churning, lush-green waters as her face submerged and then momentarily burst through the surface to gasp precious air, before falling back into the suffocating blanket of water. I was helpless, glued to the spot as she fought valiantly to cling to life, as she gulped in lungfuls of the killing water, breathed her last breath, and died.

No

Doctor?

I felt as if I had been struck, hard, across the face. I slumped to my wounded knees and sprawled on the carpeted deck, drained of all energy and will.

Are you ill? A gentle hand was laid on my shoulder, and I snapped my head up to look at Miss Lamb. Alive and well.

Alive and well.

Dont go in the water, I shouted, far more loudly than was necessary.

What? asked Miss Lamb, startled and taking a step backwards.

I repeated myself. I tried to stand, stumbled and fell, rose again and grabbed Miss Lamb by the shoulders, shaking the woman to try to compel her to listen to me.

She looked terrified. I dread to think what I must have looked like to her.

Dont go in the water, I said again. I could feel my eyes bulging, such was my insistence.

Why?

Its dangerous. Ive just had …

What, exactly, could I tell her? How could I best describe the experience without sounding like a lunatic? A precognitive vision in which she was drowning? A flash of extreme future-shock? A warning to the curious?

I tried to recover my composure, to back away rapidly from the wild-eyed mania that I felt. I wanted to scream at her. To tell her to turn and run to her cabin, to lock the door and not to come out until we arrived in New York. I resisted the temptation.

Instead, I walked past her to the cerulean blue double doors to the pool and stood there barring her entrance.

Please do not go into this place, I beg of you, I said. I cannot explain why you mustnt enter, you simply have to take my word for it that … I could say nothing further. I sighed, shook my head, and let my arms drop to my sides. I looked at her, pleadingly.

After a long pause, Miss Lamb shivered. This is a bad place, isnt it? she asked, echoing exactly what Simpkins had told me earlier.

You feel it too? I asked.

Im sensitive, she replied, a double meaning that certainly didnt seem out of place. Ive been deluding myself for too long. Trying to ignore my feelings. Then, she looked at me closely, curiously, and with an accusing stare. Youve seen them all too, havent you? she demanded. The ghosts? Theyre all over the ship.

My reply was slow in coming and deliberately worded so as to be as

noncommittal and oblique as possible. I have seen things that I cannot readily explain.

I felt like a charlatan as I said it. And like a coward when I said no more.

Here?

Yes.

She nodded. What she was thinking at that moment, I can only speculate. Betrayal.

Fear. Uncertainty. A combination of all three, perhaps? You said you believed that it was all in my mind, she noted at last. That such things do not exist.

I may have been precipitous in my assessment of the situation.

Meaning? she asked in a harsh whisper at my deliberate gobbledegook.

I shrugged. I really didnt know. Or, at least, I pretended to myself that I didnt.

Meaning that Ive seen things that may have changed my mind, I replied, with as much truth as I could manage at that moment. And that was not much.

We walked slowly back to Miss Lambs cabin in a stony silence broken only by the occasional greetings that we received from passing fellow travellers. These were pointedly ignored by both of us. As we reached her cabin door, I thanked Miss Lamb for trusting me and told her that I would see her again in the morning.

Miss Lamb looked at me, silently. It was as if she had something that she desperately wanted to tell me but, equally, she was wholly unable to do so and was, thus, trapped between two worlds: the spoken and the unspoken.

Finally, with an almost painfully hoarse whisper, that seemed to have dragged itself from the pit of her stomach and fought its way to her throat, she bade me good night.

She reminded me at that moment of a poem I couldnt remember or

song Im not sure even existed, heard in a place I may never have visited. I will see you in the morning, I told her again. She leant and quickly kissed me on the cheek, before turning and closing the door without another word.

She did not believe me, I knew, and, more worryingly, I did not believe myself either.

Some hours later, in the dead of another wild and terrible night of the soul, I once again wandered into the area close to Miss Lambs cabin. The TARDIS had offered a temporary sanctuary from the constant whispers and cries of so-called ghosts lurking around each and every corner. But my mind would not allow me simply to stay there and try to shut out the horrors of the ship. Therefore, once the initial relief at being away from the oppressive atmosphere of the decks had gone, I found myself back on board the Queen Mary. Facing my fears. This time, as I left the TARDIS, I took my hat with me. Somehow the situation seemed to require it.

Apparitions occasionally appeared to me as I walked purposefully towards First Class.

I did my best to ignore them and the almost meaningless words and phrases that they mouthed to me. I had something more important to worry about than these invaders from the borders of reality.

Something was wrong. Desperately wrong. I knew that, several moments before I rounded the corner that led to the corridor containing Miss Lambs cabin and saw Simpkins and Jarvis, outside the door, furiously banging upon it and calling out to her.

I sprinted towards them and, as I did so, the whispering, chanting, cajoling voices of the manifestations around the ship became clearer. An instantaneous realisation as to what they had been trying to tell me for all these hours came to me. A repetitious statement of intent.

Too late.

Whats going on? I asked.

Jarvis turned to me with fear in his eyes. Miss Lamb rang for a sandwich half an hour since, but she isnt answering her door.

Water, water everywhere, yet not a drop to drink …

I reached Simpkins and Jarvis and we, the three of us, looked at each

other for a moment in a bemused, uncertain triangle. Not a word was spoken, or needed to be, for we all knew what had to be done next.

Weve been knocking and calling to her for ten minutes, Jarvis said at last. No reply.

You have a pass key? I asked, wondering why Simpkins and Jarvis were not already in the room doing what needed to be done.

Its been locked from the inside and the keys still in the lock, Simpkins told me, banging on the door once more. It wont budge. Ive got a really bad feeling about this.

Without waiting to hear what, exactly, his premonition was, I put my shoulder to the door. It didnt move an inch. I tried again and Simpkins joined me. We tumbled through as the door burst inwards in a cascade of wooden splinters.

Miss Lamb? I heard Jarvis ask behind me. Neither Simpkins nor I spoke. We could see.

Miss Lambs pale white and naked body lay at the bottom of her bathtub, her still-open eyes glaring at me accusingly through the clear, motionless water. Why didnt you come sooner? she seemed to be asking. You said it would be all right.

Oh sweet Jesus, Mary and Joseph, said Simpkins, crossing himself and stumbling backwards into Jarvis. Behind him Jarvis, trying to peer over his friends shoulder, saw the body, and let out a brief and girlish scream of terror.

Instinctively, I removed my hat and clutched it in my trembling hands.

Shes drowned, continued Simpkins somewhat pointlessly, given the circumstantial evidence before him.

Clearly, I noted. For a moment, I genuinely could not decide what I should do next.

Examine the body for signs of foul play when I knew, knew for certain, that there would be none?

No.

Not for her.

I had been confused at first, when I had seen the body. My initial reaction had been that the ghosts, or whatever the manifestations were, had got to her and killed her for merriment and japery. That was a possibility but, just as tragic, if not more so, was the more likely probability that it was simply an accident. An accident of which I had been made aware, before the fact.

Had my vision been a warning, like the writing on the wall earlier? Had they, whoever they were, tried to warn Miss Lamb, through me, not to go near water?

Water, water everywhere yet not a drop to drink …

I gave poor, lonely, doomed Miss Lamb a final and lingering look. I tried to imagine the terror that must have gone through her mind as she experienced the last woeful seconds of her short and, perhaps, painful life. It was all too easy to do so.

In the midst of life we are in death, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

The water was so still now, that it was almost like looking through a sheet of glass.

Tiny air bubbles had formed themselves around Miss Lambs body, sticking to her skin the way that limpets cling to submerged rocks. Her lips were slightly parted, her clean white teeth just visible. It was almost as if she were smiling. Almost, but not quite.

The ship lurched in the waves at that moment and the bath waters rippled gently, sending the bubbles floating upwards to the surface, and to freedom.

Anguished by the sight of the dead woman and her maddeningly accusing eyes, I turned away and left the two stewards alone with the body.

CHAPTER SIX

A WARNING TO THE

CURIOUS

Out flew the web and floated wide, the mirror crackd from side to side, The curse

is come upon me, cried the Lady of Shalott.

ALFRED, LORD TENNYSON, THE LADY OF

SHALOTT

I EXPERIENCED THE AFTERMATH OF THIS TERRIBLE, TRAGIC event in a state of quiet numbness. I felt the bitter taste of bile in my mouth as I reached the corridor and spent several fruitless moments searching for a place in which to be sick. It was unusual for me to react that way to death, that occupational hazard of my way of life, but there are moments when even Time Lords retch at the horrors of existence.

This was such a moment.

I had run out of all the easy options. And most of the difficult options too. But there was one thing that I could do, one thing that would satisfy me and make me feel real and honest again, at least to myself.

I returned to the TARDIS and, finding in the old cloisters a bare brick wall that hadnt seen any light in decades, I proceeded to beat my fists against it, cursing the universe and fate. Cursing evil and stupidity. Cursing and swinging out at everything wildly, though sometimes accurately; but, chiefly, cursing myself and my well-developed ability to be occasionally, totally and utterly wrong about everything. With fatal consequences.

Fortune is always hiding, they say.

I took a long, hard look at my own bad fortune. It was not a pretty sight in the slightest.

I felt hollow and sickened by my failure to help poor Miss Lamb. To stop the inevitable process that led to her demise. It was such a simple and easy thing to do.

Just one solitary life to save.

Not a state or a world this time or a solar system, nor the entire universe itself, but just one woman. One lonely and helpless woman. An intelligent, charming and fascinating woman who had depended, for her life, on me.

No complications, no concerns about changing the timelines or creating imperfect futures or alternate pasts. Just a straightforward piece of common-or-garden, everyday heroism. And I couldnt even manage that.

I wept. For the first time in many long years, I cried selfish, angry and inconsolable tears. Again, I tried to leave the ghost ship, and all the horrors that it contained, far behind me. Again, the TARDIS simply refused to comply.

It was as if I were being punished for my numerous inabilities; for the way in which I had become so wrapped up in trivia that I was missing the obvious. The TARDIS was telling me that what was going on upon this ship was now my problem. And that any solutions would have to be my solutions.

So, once again, I was forced to leave my bubble-pack world and walk up onto the top deck, my chest heaving with the exertion as I climbed the stairs to feel the thick and heavy sea salt in the air, a hand clamped to my head to stop my hat from flying off into the sea. To watch another Atlantic sunrise.

Another dawn from the same sky.

I vaguely remember shouting out in my anger and frustration, proclaiming in the gathering light that I was ready to surrender to whatever forces were present on the ship. My words echoed back to me from the relentless, cruel sea. I knew, finally, what I had to do.

It was what I should have been doing all along.

Facing my fear for real this time.

Searching for the heart of truth and messing around in things that did not concern me.

Being myself, in other words.

Following the apparitions in a twisting route around the ship, up stairs and down stairs, was relatively straightforward. It was clear that they wanted me to go in a particular direction, and it soon became apparent just which direction that was.

Down.

Down towards the middle decks. Down to Cabin 672. And to whatever destiny awaited me.

Again I allowed myself to be drawn, this time willingly, to this benighted place.

I thought, as I went, about all the despicable people that I had met in my lives and on my travels. Not the real twenty-four carat lunatics bent on universal domination or all that nonsense, but everyday, common-orgarden evil. Lying, thieving people with poisoned minds, uttering cruel and hurtful words. Those who had no excuse with which to mitigate their spiteful, critical ways.

It was small evil, perhaps, but in many ways far more pernicious than something on a much grander scale. There was small evil at work in this place. I felt it. I knew its distasteful smell. Small evil, conceived by small minds.

Once more I felt the twin thump of nervous hearts, saddened and petrified, and the light-headedness of a breath being caught and then not released nearly soon enough.

It felt odd and uncomfortable, yes; irritating like a wind catching a loose filling on a cold winters day. I stopped in my tracks and turned around, starting to walk back in the direction from which I had come. But as soon as I turned the next corner, I realised that I had, unconsciously, doubled back upon myself and was still heading, relentlessly, for Cabin 672.

I considered the nature of ghosts as I walked. But, I do not believe in ghosts.

Once again, I heard the sound of a distant screaming carried on the ether for anyone who cared to listen.

My belief system took a considerable blow and, winded, squatted on the floor trying to make itself inconspicuous.

Was I the only one who could hear it? The only one who cared what was going on upon this ship?

Seemingly I was, as no-one else seemed inclined to accompany me on my inevitable path to Cabin 672.

I didnt touch the door this time when I arrived, despite the urging inside my head that I should do so. I had made that unwise mistake once already, and it was one that had cost a precious life that could not be replaced. A needless death. I wasnt prepared to repeat it no matter how much it might have seemed like the right thing to do. Instead, I moved to one side and knocked loudly on the door of the neighbouring cabin, 673. The sound of my knocking echoed down the corridor. I paused.

After waiting for an age, and receiving no reply, I knocked again, more urgently this time, my knuckles rapping in a quick, rhythmic staccato on the wood. Nothing. I put my hand carefully on the doorknob of Cabin 673 and turned. This time, at this door, there was no tingling sensation and no voices. Only silence.

The door opened, slowly, with a squeal of protest as rusted hinges and warped, damp wood rubbed up against each other and howled like fighting cats.

I entered the room.

Apart from long-abandoned furniture, stacked, mildewed towels on a rail and some thin cobwebs that disintegrated when touched, the room was completely empty.

I looked around the cabin with no little surprise. I cannot say for certain what, exactly, I had expected to find inside this room. At least, not with hindsight. But at that particular moment it seemed extremely ordinary to me. Frighteningly so.

Having geared myself up for a date with hell and damnation, this was more like Stoke Newington railway station on a wet Wednesday afternoon in November.

The same small, bland, neatly laid out bed as in every other cabin stood against the back wall. The same bath tub, its white enamel surface chipped away here and there, leaving tiny black memories of accidental moments from the past, was positioned behind the door. The black spots looked like spy holes in the snow. I touched the smooth rim of the bath, perhaps hoping that something of the ships

dreadful history had been recorded for posterity within the surface.

Nothing.

This room held absolutely no secrets. At least none worth sharing. My interest in it waned and died. There was nothing for me here. Except …

I turned my attention to the wall connecting this room to Cabin 672, drawn by some distant voice in the back of my mind that told me that it was something worth investigating. Again, the dull, off-cream wallpaper and dirty, poorly painted wainscoting suggested nothing out of the ordinary, apart from several decades of neglect. This room, like its more notorious neighbour, seemed not to have been occupied for a very long time.

Slowly, cautiously, I approached the wall. I listened from a few inches away to see if I could hear any sound emerging from behind the paper-thin barrier, but once more, there was only silence.

This entire detour had, I decided, been a waste of time.

In something approaching anger, I placed my hand on the wall and put my ear to it, almost daring the ghosts to speak to me.

Oh, what a foolish old Doctor I can be.

What I heard was the sound of people. More people than I could possibly count in a dozen lifetimes. Thousands of them, all sobbing and wailing in misery.

The sound of the damned.

The power of their voices was utterly overwhelming and I collapsed to the floor, clutching my head, which was full of the screams and the pleas. As I lay, feeling dizzy and sick on the dusty carpet, the wall seemed to distort and bend out of shape.

It appeared that the faces of the screaming people were all pushing at it simultaneously, trying to break out of their prison and have their freedom through me. I groaned, wearily, closed my eyes, and slumped into a blissful unconsciousness.

When I came to, some hours seemed to have passed, judging by the shadows cast through the porthole by the now setting sun. This would be our last night at sea before New York came into view in the dawns

early light. If we ever got there, of course. Such feelings had been with me since the moment I had first stepped from the TARDIS, just three days earlier. It seemed more like three years.

I ignored my, by now almost overwhelming, terror and fought back an urge to turn and run away again. That would do no good. I knew that for certain. I picked myself up from the cabin floor and left the room, giving it a final, disgusted glance. The only secret this cabin would now have to tell was how I had been brought to my knees by a lack of judgement and by my own limitations.

Finally, now, I was going to open the door to Cabin 672. I spent some time preparing myself and gathering my fluctuating courage for the initial shock that I would feel when I touched the doorknob. My hand reached for it and, even from the distance of several inches, I could feel the electric sparks, spitting and kicking out to me. I froze and almost withdrew my hand. Then, summoning up the final vestiges of my waning courage, I grasped the bronze knob and, howling in miserable pain, twisted it.

The cold hit me first as the door opened and my hand flew to my side. An icy blast rattled through my bones, shaking me to my very core. Then, a wind. A mighty hurricane that battered my face and almost swept me from my feet.

A screaming, leering skull rushed towards me from out of the tempest. This time I really did have nowhere else to go, so I stood my ground and closed my eyes.

I do not believe in ghosts, I mouthed, as if some redundant self-defence mechanism inside me had clicked, effortlessly, into gear. I do not believe in ghosts. I do not believe in ghosts.

The wind stopped, abruptly. For a second there was a total silence.

And then I heard the tiny chinking sound of a tea cup and saucer.

Opening my eyes, I looked into the cabin. Instead of, as I expected, a room crammed from ceiling to floor with piles of rotting corpses and embittered angry souls shaking their fists at me and demanding to know just what I thought I was playing at, there was a rather unprepossessing man in his mid thirties sitting at a writing table, surrounded by sheets of paper, some written upon, others screwed up into little balls and discarded.

He was drinking from a china tea cup with white-gloved hands. Seeing

me, he smiled.

It was not a cruel or sadistic smile, but rather an enigmatic and inscrutable one, rather like the smile on the face of the Mona Lisa. This man, I sensed, knew many things that were hidden to me. And that seemed to please him greatly.

Tea? he asked, as if he had been expecting me all along.

CHAPTER SEVEN

BEHIND THAT

LOCKED DOOR

Death, old captain, it is time,

let us raise the anchor.

CHARLES BAUDELAIRE, LE

VOYAGE

THE MAN WAS SO UTTERLY UNREMARKABLE IN EACH AND every conceivable way that, for the briefest of moments, I wondered if I had come to the wrong room entirely. I did a double-take and checked the number on the back of the door to confirm that this was, indeed, Cabin

672.

Usually I use moments of buffoonery like this to try to buy myself a little time or to put my adversaries off their guard. I cannot, in all honesty, say for certain that this was my intention on this particular occasion.

I turned to face the object of my quest.

The man was slight of build, and prematurely balding. He wore thick, black, horn-rimmed spectacles, and his face, with its sad, hooded eyes and a prominent nose, seemed intelligent and placid. He had a deeply furrowed brow that spoke of many hours pondering upon the whim and caprices of outrageous fortune. Certainly he appeared to spend a lot of his time thinking about something or other. His clothes however all polyester and tweed, with black leather sew-on elbow pads on his ginger jacket

spoke of a lack of any real interest in conventions or mores or of what anybody other than he thought about himself. Or of anything else, come to that.

He looked like a stereotypical representation of a mad scientist.

He looked, if truth be told, a little like me.

All right, then. A lot like me.

Hello, said the man flatly, without standing or even looking at me directly. He sucked a pencil end and began to scribble something in an indistinct, spidery hand on one of the yellowing bits of paper in front of him. Youve come at last to see me. I knew that you would, do you see? I dont know how I knew, I just knew, you know? He paused in his writing and took a brief sip from his tea cup which, judging by the expression on his face, was either clay cold or scalding hot. And then, finally, he looked up at me with what might have been an intense curiosity in his eyes. Or perhaps it was something else entirely. Something wicked and dangerous. I thought, again, about the concept of small evil. Im afraid youll have to excuse the mess,

he continued. Never seem to get room service in this blooming cabin, for some reason or other that I havent fathomed out yet. But I will, given the time.

Time? I asked. Its always a question of time, is it not?

An abstract concept, the man noted. Any old fool knows that. Somebody said that once. It might have been me, actually. His words were a rapid-fire stream of consciousness. Wooden wheels chattering over a cobbled stone road. Rat-a-tat. Rat-a-tat. Rat-a-tat. Nervous, agitated and only vaguely interconnected with each other, like atoms whirling around in magnificent isolation. A perfect metaphor.

He seemed bored by our conversation now, and changed the subject. Have you ever said something really witty and fantastic that you wanted everyone to hear and then completely forgotten youd said it? And then, later, youve quoted it to somebody saying as someone once said and then only later again, youve realised that it was actually you that said it in the first place? He giggled lightly, and quite madly, and then seemed to lose all interest in me, returning his attention to his notes.

Possibly, I replied, but he wasnt listening anymore. I was confused as to why he was in this cabin at all. Simpkins had told me earlier that it was never occupied. I had been told that this room was always unoccupied, I said.

You were misinformed, came the simple reply. Its amazing what ten

pounds can buy.

Especially from ships crew open to bribes. I sensed the vibrations, didnt you?

I nodded. Something terrible has gone on in this place. I left it at that.

The other thing that people do that really annoys me he began, as though our previous conversation had never happened, not that youre annoying me you understand, but just say you were is when they say something horribly offensive to someone and then add no offence at the end, as though that somehow wipes out all the hurt and the spite in the original statement. My host was talking through gritted teeth now, as if from a bitter and long-standing personal experience. That gets me so angry. Doesnt it get you angry?

He hadnt taken his eyes from the page in front of him all the while. His cold and measured tone was a million miles away from the uncontrollable raging and frothing that might have been expected. I politely ignored this loaded question and looked around the room. The cabin interior, on the surface, looked just like all the others that I had seen during the voyage. Except that this one contained, resting on the night-table beside the bed, a large bell-shaped jar with a cork lid. I cautiously approached it and peered at it closely. The glass had a rich, slightly blue tinge that I recognised from looking through the eyes of the ghostly manifestations.

Wires led away from the jar towards various pieces of electrical equipment strewn randomly around the floor of the room and all linked together by bulldog clips and thick copper wiring wrapped around with sticky tape. It was a chaotic and eccentric contraption built, seemingly, from a metronome, an electrical pulse generator, two tin cans soldered together to form a primitive tachyon particle accelerator and, most horrifying of all, the large glass jar sitting at the centre of the wires like a big fat spider at the heart of its sinister web. The invention seemed to have been cobbled into shape from odds and ends, knick-knacks of every shape and description.

With my more than elementary knowledge of tachyon physics I realised instantly that this machine would, given the right conditions, function.

As a death-trap, at the very least.

Be careful with that device, a dismissive, almost parental voice told me from over my shoulder. I turned, but the man still hadnt raised his

head from his work. Its a somewhat delicate contraption. My lifes work, such as it is. Did I ask you if you would like some tea? Im becoming so forgetful these days.

No, thank you, I said, declining his offer. Wait a moment. Dont I know you from somewhere? Realisation came to me as I recalled the newspaper article and accompanying photograph that I had briefly glimpsed a couple of days earlier in the forward bar. Youre Professor Peter Osbourne, the man whos supposed to be building a time machine.

Can I note, here and now, that I managed to say all this without breaking into hysterical laughter; which was, I consider after the event, to be a feat well worth boasting about. Is that what this is? I asked, suppressing the merest hint of a snigger on my lips and waving my hand over his collection of radio ham amateur electronics. That is what all this is supposed to represent?

A time visualiser, corrected Osbourne, with a big-toothed grin. The purpose of this invention of mine is to allow a view into the past or the future. I dont want to travel to different times, I want to see them. Of course, Im at a very early stage in the development of it, he noted. But, Im sure youll agree that the progress so far has been … outstanding.

Then, it seemed to sink in that I knew who he was. He stood up from his table and came eagerly towards me, clearly delighted to be meeting such a fan. Youve heard of me and my work? he asked. How flattering.

Only what little Ive read, I replied as dismissively as I deemed appropriate. This seemed to deflate his ego. No offence, I added, deliberately.

Then you clearly have me at something of a disadvantage, he said, rapidly losing any vestige of interest in me or my opinion.

Im the Doctor, I told him. Im delighted to meet a man of your immense reputation. I held out my hand to him, but the scientist merely gave it a cursory glance and then turned away from me, wounded, snubbing my invited handshake. Time travel, I continued. An impossible dream for many throughout the ages.

For those who have lived their petty lives in monochrome perhaps, said Osbourne arrogantly, as he sat back down. He looked at me curiously.

And, youre a doctor of what, exactly?

Oh, this, that and the other, I told him, but, of particular relevance to this conversation, quantum and tachyon physics. Jelly baby?

Osbourne ignored the question. He seemed to be weighing me up with his eyes, trying to decide which side of the fence I was on, so to speak. Where do you stand on the issue? he asked, presumably meaning that he had not been able to decide for himself.

I shrugged. What is, was. What was, shall be, I replied. Time is only a dimension.

Its nothing to write poetry about.

And a dimension that can be conquered? Osbourne queried.

You do not conquer time, I said, shaking my head and trying not to sound like the authority on the subject that I was. Time conquers you. Its an eternal and very unequal battle.

I like you, said Osbourne, seemingly satisfied with my answer. Most of the people I meet are rascals, stupid idealists or absurd cynics when it comes to time. You seem to be none of those things. A black one, please, he asked, rooting around in my bag of confectionery.

Oh, but that said so very much about the man on so many levels. On the contrary, that is not true in the slightest, Im sorry to say, I confessed. I am frequently all three. Sometimes simultaneously.

Now he asked me a question that surprised me. Do you believe in God?

I took far longer to answer this than I felt comfortable with. It was a question that I had been asked several times before, although never in anything like these circumstances. My answer was usually couched in riddles and abstract sentiments. I saw no reason to change the habits of a lifetime and replied with a question of my own. Do you mean as a spiritual and moral centre within the individual? As a concept to define whether free will is merely an illusion after all? As a theory to explain the delicious ironies of nature? Or as an old man with a white beard who lives in the sky?

Osbourne thought about this for a moment. As a reality to the

presence in which you find yourself, he finally replied. I am become God, he continued. I hold all the power of the universe at my fingertips. Its quite a humbling experience, as Im sure you can imagine. He paused for my reaction and, getting only a small exhalation of breath and a curious inclination of one eyebrow, he went on with his revelation. I once met a man who thought he could count a million angels dancing on a pinhead by using cosmic radiation and a big magnifying glass, Osbourne said, straight-faced, his words again coming in rapid bursts of gunfire from his mouth. Spent decades trying to perfect the technique. It was his lifes work. Poor chap, completely mad, of course.

Science and religion are often much closer than you might think,I said after a moment. Look at it this way; nothing, light, then the universe. Theyre pretty much in agreement about that. Its just when you get to all the burning bushes and the Whore of Babylon that they go off on different roads.

I am the Lord thy God and thou shalt worship no other God before me? he queried.

Yes, well, we all like to be at the centre of everyones attention, dont we? Its only natural.

He indicated that I should sit, which I did. I was still trying, without much success, to determine whether he was merely a fast-talking and rather eccentric lunatic with a silly messiah complex or something infinitely more dangerous. Again, I looked at the bell jar, and that helped me to reach my decision far more quickly than I should have liked.

Part of the process youve perfected? I asked.

Osbourne smiled at me. An odious, calculated, self-satisfied little grin. The final part of the process, he announced proudly. The culmination of a seismic and unstoppable chain reaction. It does this. The scientist leaned over to the nearest tangle of wires and circuitry and flicked a trigger-switch. The instrumentation hummed into action as, across the room, the metronome began to tick hypnotically backwards and forwards, backwards and forwards, backwards and forwards.

Coils whirred, spools of magnetic tape looped and sang, electricity flowed through valves in the makeshift particle accelerator, which spluttered to life like a bronchial old man rising unwillingly from a deep sleep. An electric current connected with the jar, which began to

hum softly and glow a faint translucent yellow.

Behold, said Osbourne like a conjurer producing the Ace of Spades from up his sleeve to a startled audience, the miracle of the resurrection. This, what happens now, is the really impressive bit.

The glass glowed brightly and I could see the ghosts within it, pressed against the glass, tormented faces sealed in miniature. Trapped within the confines of the jar.

Their suffering was, I imagined, almost unimaginable.

For the universe runs on such contradictions as this and lots more besides.

Osbourne was talking, now, of the specifics of his theories and of the possibilities of time displacement for practical and recreational use. Replacing television with a device that enabled one to see, in ones own living room and at the flick of a switch, the Crusades or the Crimean War or, even better, events yet to come. But his manic bleating held no real interest for me. All I could focus on was what terrible things were going on within the bell jar.

I reflected then that some people do terrible things to others because they have been the victims of traumatic, life-changing events in their own lives, and this has warped their morality. Or, they do terrible things to try to understand the process that makes others do such deeds in the, usually mistaken, belief that such understanding will as a matter of course make the world a better place. Some people blame their environment or the circumstances of their early lives for making them the way that they are; and, in the final analysis, there may be something to be said for each being a contributory factor. Still others do the things that they do as an intellectual exercise, as part of a game they play with their own rationality. Its a tough world, the argument goes, and youve got to be tough in it.

But there are some people who, simply, do terrible, wicked things to others because they like doing them.

Thats why Im going to America, do you see? he chattered on. Theyre reasonable people, theyre absolutely loaded and they appreciate genius. Theyve got the sun and theyve got the palm trees. I mean, I could have stayed in London, of course. If only those fools at the Ministry had actually been interested in something other than new uses for toxic nerve gas or how to get radium to power television sets or whatever nonsense they want from us this week. Well, I ask you …

He shook his head in annoyance. I could have built my time visualiser there and marketed it. Watch your own future from the comfort of your armchair! Companies were interested. I cant disclose who, but Im sure youll know them. It would have made me a millionaire. I could have, dare I say it, ruled the world. If only Id been eligible for the government grant.

Are you quite finished, you very silly man? I asked, irritated when he finally ran himself dry of rhetoric. It was as clear as crystal that Osbourne was completely insane. He had become, as many scientists are prone to, obsessed with his creation.

And by his own insecure vanity. What youre doing is fantastically dangerous, I told him. Youre playing God and you arent doing it very well, I have to tell you.

They say that the line between outright genius and outright madness is a thin one, I continued, sadly. And you seem to be living proof of that.

Osbourne began to laugh at me. A callous lunatic chuckle that turned into a snigger and seemed to go on and on and on for hours, rattling in his throat. And, as he laughed, so he plucked the cork from the bell jar and the ghosts began to appear. All of them, surging out from their enclosed world and filling the room with the sounds of their despair.

See what Ive done, Doctor, Osbourne shouted above the rising crescendo. See what Ive been and gone and done!

I looked around myself and I saw it.

A terrible thing.

CHAPTER EIGHT

DISPOSSESSED

O soul, be changed into little water drops,

and fall into the ocean, neer be found.

CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE, DOCTOR FAUSTUS

THE NOISE OF THE RELEASED GHOSTS REVERBERATED AROUND THE room. It was awe inspiring, like the release of a vast, ceaseless wind into a long valley. The shockwaves hit me at the same time as they hit everything else in the room, and every atom in my body was affected by it. The cabin porthole threatened to shatter and let loose the ghosts from their prison but, I suspected, even that eventuality would not see them leave.

They were trapped here, on this ship. Bound by circumstances and by bonds too tight ever to break. Here, terribly, they would remain for as long as the ship remained.

After a moment, the wailing, caterwauling sounds reduced to a more sedate and sane level, and I stole a glance across at Osbourne. He sat amid the swirling torrent of ill-defined shapes in a circle of ethereal light. He was still smirking with an undisguised glee at just how clever a little boy he was. It sickened me. There was something beyond amoral about this man. Beyond any concept of science as sanity.

Desperate, tragic, overwhelmingly small evil.

But now, at last, I finally understood the nature of the manifestations that had been lingering around me, haunting me for the past days, and which filled the room around me even as I worked it all out. I could give their suffering a name, at least.

Youve been randomly trapping within this jar the essences of people who have been or are or will be on board the ship when some terrible tragedy has befallen them or when they have been feeling sad or

lonely or depressed. Am I right? I asked Osbourne, angrily.

If he was surprised that I had discovered the exact nature of his cruel experiments, he didnt show it. He maintained his bland mask of a casual lack of interest in everything going on around him. Ghosts of the past, I continued when he refused to answer me, ghosts of the present and ghosts of the future. These essences, although only fragments or echoes of true reality, nevertheless do possess a measure of human consciousness. And an understanding of their plight. And the process only works on negative energy because it requires such huge levels of adrenaline and brain activity to give it a kick-start.

It was something that I had dreaded ever since the first apparition had made itself known to me. Osbournes machine wasnt just capturing people at the point of their death. After all, how many people had died, or would die, on board the Queen Mary? A couple of hundred at most, perhaps? But there were many tens of thousands of spirits in here. What Osbourne was trapping in his obscene experiment, like some grotesque butterfly collection, were snapshots of the essence of people. Of passengers, crew, visitors, stretching from the moment that the ships first rivet was cast to the inevitable point, perhaps several thousands of years in the future, when the last piece of the iron hull would have rusted and rotted into oblivion. Essences from the point in time when all these lost souls were depressed or frightened or lonely or sick of life. A tiny fragment of virtually everyone who had ever been or ever would be, on or in or near the ship. Past, present, and future. The bell jar fed on negative energy, and there was always plenty of that around. The skull, a universal symbol of fear and depression, was an obvious representation of this. I shuddered that it had taken me so long to work out something so simple. And so cruel.

Suddenly, everything became clear to me. Thats why this room has always had such a reputation. Because its the psychic centre of the ship. The second that you started your obscene contraption a few days ago, ripples were created in time in both directions, as it sucked in all the negative energy that it could find. Its not a wonder that people have gone mad in this place.

Osbourne inclined his head to one side, a look of absolute and cynical disdain on his face. A look that told of some harsh truths about to be spoken, perhaps. So? he asked, half-standing and parting the ghostly forms in front of him like someone wafting away unwanted cigarette smoke with a dismissive, arrogant wave of the hand.

What is your point?

The implication was simple and obvious. He just did not give a damn.

Theyre alive in there, I shouted. Those poor people, they know whats going on, what stupid games youre playing. They tried to warn me. They tried to warn Miss Lamb that she was going to die. And now shes in there with them, a part of them. You dont care, do you?

I was reminded of a deep and lengthy conversation I had once shared with a Roman centurion, at a settlement near Condercum, about the morality of what amounted to ethnic genocide of the barbarian Caledonians. And I remember still the horror and the shame that I had felt at the time, and subsequently, that I could neither affect the outcome nor, perhaps more pertinently, his judgement in the matter. For intelligent men are always prone to the belief that they can change the world for the better if only they can get everyone else to think and act as they themselves do.

It happens. It has happened. It will happen again.

And that was where I came in. Whats the point, I was forced to ask, of being able to live outside of time itself if all it allows you to do is to watch the same mistakes being made over and over and over again?

For history repeats the old conceits, the glib replies and the same defeats.

What youre doing here is something that almost defies belief, I told Osbourne, knowing that they were wasted words but saying them anyway because my conscience would not allow me not to do so.

Thank you, he replied, beaming.

How like politicians scientists can be. Show them a wheel if theyd never seen one before, and they would believe that they had invented it.

It was not well meant.

The scientist shrugged as though unable fully to grasp the point that I was trying to make. Perhaps he genuinely could not. It is possible that my arguments were simply beyond his comprehension, so far removed was he from the realm of sanity. I fail to understand your concerns, Doctor, he confirmed, with a seemingly sincere air of befuddlement and an exasperated sigh. You appear to be an intelligent man. A man of science. Yet these sentiments you glibly throw at me, they are neither valid nor scientific. They are sentimental nonsense. Are you

not impressed by the significant advances that I have managed to achieve in my work thus far? This could change the very future of mankind.

Thats not the point, I replied, astonished at this mans hubris and the fact that he couldnt grasp something so simple, so basic.

Oh, but I very much think that it is the point, Osbourne snarled.

I didnt get where I am today by backing down to lily-livered and namby-pamby concerns about consequence. My conscience is clear. Always. Where would science be if every time someone reached a point of breakthrough they stopped and spent all their effort wringing their hands in consternation and asking if they had the right to do it? Its preposterous. Wed get nothing done and all be flapping about like the dodo, waiting for our extinction to come.

But you must ask those questions, I argued. You have that responsibility. All those of learning do. It goes with the territory. Unbridled curiosity is as dangerous a driving force as ambition or greed or lust.

Osbourne tutted loudly, his scowling face turned away from me. Clearly, he was going to have none of it. Did Einstein wait to check which way the wind was blowing before he calculated the velocity of the speed of light? Did Oppenheimers research into electron-positron pairs stop for tea and twenty questions with the local womens guild? Did Kelvins second law of thermodynamics have to await a rubber-stamp by the procurator fiscal? And I suppose that Fracastoros work with contagion and germ warfare was subject to approval by the Inquisition?

Actually, I felt like observing, Fracastoros work was subject to approval by the Inquisition. I let the matter pass. Have you finished? I asked.

But he had not. This machine of my creation has done something that no-one else has ever achieved, he said, proudly pointing to himself with a trembling finger. What do you expect? A great wailing and gnashing of teeth? No, Doctor, not from me. He was shaking with anger now and, perhaps, a touch of excitement. Dont you find the achievement in the least little bit impressive, Doctor? Because, Ill tell you something for nothing, I do.

I could not believe this mans callous conceit and disregard for the most basic human compassion. And I could not understand it either. I

had tried to, but now I had given up trying. Whats it for? I shouted, angrily. Why did you invent something that causes nothing but pain and misery and suffering? What reason can you possibly have for making such an abomination?

Why? asked Osbourne. You want to know why? Because I can!

Thats … I paused, shocked. A crime, I finally added.

Then write to your MP, suggested Osbourne cynically. Have the authorities put a stop to my wicked ways … He held his hands together in mock surrender. Ill come quietly.

Oh, grow up, I told him. I stood, and the ghosts parted for me like a pair of heavy draped curtains drawing back. For a second I thought about thanking them.

Some of the shapes I could vaguely recognise from my experiences around the ship, but there were many, many others that were new to me. One, in particular, caught my attention. It was, perhaps, the most horrifying image of all: the torso and head of Simpkins, seemingly cut in half and screaming in anguish. I looked at the shimmering, barely comprehensible visitation and my anger rose to levels that, even now, frighten me. At that point, in that room, with that man sitting opposite me with a smug expression on his face, I could easily have killed.

That hasnt happened yet, I argued, pointing at the Simpkins ghost, This man is still alive and working on the ship at this very moment. You could have used this invention to try to save that young mans life from some future tragedy instead of damning his spirit to an eternity of imprisonment.

You are a weak and feeble wretch, Osbourne said from within his shroud, his carnival tent of souls. His words echoed out to me, magnified and distorted by the curious phenomena that had engulfed him. I thought you were not like all the others, Doctor, but you are. Your mind is so full of concern for everyone else that you have no time to think of yourself.

Osbourne was clearly proud of his achievements. The soul, he continued. What is the soul? I should argue that it doesnt exist. Im prepared to stake my reputation upon it.

Now, that is not something to be given up lightly, I replied sarcastically.

Osbourne ignored my barbed comment. There is no such thing as a soul, he repeated.

There is only a life-force, which is mine or anyone elses for that matter, to use as I or we or they see fit.

You are a brilliant man, I told the scientist, truthfully. And that brilliance has corrupted you. Youre beyond help. Given time, I could have …

He would not allow me to finish. Time? he interrupted. An incestuous whore. A plaything, just like the atom, to be split, dissected, cut up into fragments and studied. I shall master time and that achievement will be my immortality.

I could stand the shocking, venal lack of moral conscience in this man no longer. In a rage, I strode across the room, kicking aside the metronome and approaching the bell jar with only one intention.

Osbourne was on his feet now as, in that split second, he saw what I was planning to do. Stay away from that jar, he warned. You have no right.

Strangely, he did not try to stop me. I gave him a dismissive glance. I have every right, I shouted amid the rising cacophony of voices in the room. Now, I did not take my eyes from the jar as I picked up the wooden frame of the metronome and brought its full weight down upon the top of the glass, smashing it to smithereens with one mighty blow.

A flood of psychic energy filled the room, and me with it. Completely overwhelmed, I again found myself collapsing to the floor; but, unlike last time, there was a smile on my face as I did so. This simple act of destruction was my release from the choking constraints of the last few days. From the pain and the misery and the self-doubt and all those other things that I thought I had left behind on Gallifrey and on Skaro. A feeling of being helpless to change the course of events, of not having the right answers when the cogs that turn the wheels of the universe asked of me that I should be the one to do their dirty work for them.

The time is out of joint, oh cursed spite, that ever I was born to set it right.

This felt like the right thing to do.

It felt like a taste of freedom at last.

It

felt, in fact, like victory.

EPILOGUE

OH, HOW THE GHOST

OF YOU CLINGS

My soul, like to a ship in a black storm,

is driven, I know not whither.

JOHN

WEBSTER, THE WHITE DEVIL

I AWOKE SEVERAL HOURS LATER, DISORIENTATED AND EMERGING from a lucid dream in which I was sitting on a tartan blanket on the newly mown grass lawn of Christs College, Oxford. The smell of the freshly cut grass lingered with me for several seconds as I remembered that I was having a jolly picnic of ham and cheese sandwiches, fairy cakes and lemon tea, and that my most charming and affable companions were Le Rol Soleil Loius XIV, Joseph Goebbels, Bertrand Russell and Sir Kenneth Clark. The Marquise de Pompadour had just turned up after getting delayed in heavy traffic on the M3, and things were starting to get really interesting with a juggling jester playing a banjo whilst sitting on top of a small wall, when boom I threw myself bolt-upright from the floor.

Bizarre, I told anyone who might have been listening. But there was no reply.

I was quite alone in the room. Beyond the shattered wreckage of the jar, tiny shards of glass surrounded me in every direction like a castle moat. Quite how I had not been cut to ribbons was a question best left for another day. Carefully, I stood, shook my jacket free of the offending materials and looked around the room again.

Osbourne was nowhere to be seen.

Perhaps that was for the best.

The room was silent and still, even the dust having settled down

quietly to wait for the next blast of wind to disturb its rest.

Not quite what I expected to happen, I told the same no-one in-particular as I crossed the floor to the door, the glass splinters crunching loud beneath my feet. I picked up my hat from where it had fallen in the confusion, jammed it back on my head, and left Cabin 672. As I closed the door, I smiled broadly, happily, feeling as well and satisfied and unconcerned as I had at any time since the TARDIS had brought me to this terrible place.

I searched the ship for over thirty minutes. It was free, seemingly, of the haunting that had plagued me since my arrival and infested the ship for who-knew-how-long before that. It was as though a huge weight had been lifted from my mind. But there was one more tragedy for me to face, and it was made all the worse for me by the fact that I knew that it was coming.

As I reached the second deck, and hurried along the corridor towards the central stairwell that led up to the TARDIS, and to my freedom, I saw a group of ships personnel shouting through a locked hatch. My heart sank as I recognised one of them as Simpkinss friend, Jarvis.

Come on now, matey, I heard him cry through the bulkhead. Open it up and lets have a nice cup of tea and a chat about this. Its bloody madness.

No, came a muffled cry from the other side. This ships damned, you know that. You all know that. Were never gonna get off it alive. Im taking the only way out that I can.

Dont be a coward and a fool, Simpkins, an officer barked in reply, nudging Jarvis out of the way and speaking directly to the solid grey door. I hid behind a nearby corner and watched the tragedy unfold before me with a terrible feeling of dčja vu.

Come on, son, the officer continued, in a much more conciliatory manner. Lets have a bit less of all that Goodbye cruel world nonsense, theres no need for you to be doing any of this. Your mate heres right, come on out and well talk about it.

A red emergency light above the door, and the screeching of a warning siren told their own, sad story. Simpkins had opened the exterior bulkhead. I could not hear exactly what his final reply to his crew mates pleadings was, but the meaning of it was clear enough from the tone. Seconds later, there was the crash of the bulkhead slamming shut and the scream of Simpkins as it sliced him cleanly in

two. Killed by a fate that had fascinated him but which perhaps he could never have foreseen, but which I could. And did.

I headed back to the TARDIS with heavy hearts and a brooding sense of failure that lingered around me like a blackened thunder cloud. It was the feeling of helplessness that hurt more than of not having done the right thing. Had I been manipulated, cruelly, by fates in which I had ceased to believe seven hundred years earlier?

Perhaps. I had been used as some greater powers puppet before this, but usually, I had reconciled such situations with the inevitability that we, the fates and I, shared similar aims. On this occasion, however, I could not help but feel that nothing had been accomplished or gained for anyone, except some amusement for the wretch Osbourne. Wherever he was now.

And that was another good point. What, exactly, had happened to Osbourne? My initial feeling had been that he had been destroyed when his creation exploded but, the more I thought about it, the less likely that scenario seemed to be. I finally understood why that was, when I rounded the corner and stood facing the TARDIS to find a mass of glowing white energy surrounding it.

The spectres were still on board the ship, after all. As I suspected they always would be. They were everywhere, having formed themselves into one vast collective gestalt of psychic energy that was woven into the very fabric of the ship. No longer trapped by the jar, maybe, but now they were truly stuck here forever.

I could see individual faces within the mass the angry woman, the child, Simpkins

all bursting to the surface occasionally and then dipping back into the rippling collective beneath. But they all spoke with one voice. One booming, thundering, outrageously loud voice.

They told me to leave, and in the blink of an eye they faded and vanished.

But Osbourne was there, standing by the TARDIS with that same infuriatingly smug expression on his face. I was baffled.

Why, I found myself asking, had all the essences not simply departed the ship now that they were free from their prison? But I knew the answer even before the words had left my lips.

Where else has there ever been for us to go? asked Osbourne. Then, I understood.

All these echoes of the past, the present and the future were still trapped. Having created the problem, Osbourne was now, had always and would always be a part of it.

And I realised this as he too vanished before my eyes like a puff of smoke.

Stories From the City, Stories From the Sea

The author would like to thank his publishers, David Howe and Stephen James Walker, for giving him the tremendous opportunity to write Ghost Ship and for their generous support and encouragement during the creation of this novella. My sincere thanks to two of my oldest, dearest and most long-suffering friends Ian Abrahams and Martin Day (true gentlemen and dudes, both). Rave on. Also, to Suzanne Campagna, Paul Cornell, Tony and Jane Kenealy, Diana Dougherty, Alan Lamb, Mike Lee, Shaun Lyon, Steve The Hat Purcell, Dave McIntee, Kathy Sullivan, Jim Swallow, my excellent proof-reader Susannah Tiller, GeoffWessel (geezer), successive English teachers Alice Burnside, Mick Lovell, Billy Maxwell, Mick McCann and Anne Fulton who got me to a level of, you know, vague literacy. And my family, for everything else not covered elsewhere.

About the Author

Bohemian womaniser, revolutionary spirit and general all-round sleazeball, Keith Topping is a journalist and author of over twenty books including two editions of The Guinness Book of Classic British TV, numerous guides to TV series as diverse as The X-Files, Star Trek, The Avengers and Roswell for Virgin Books, four BBC Doctor Who novels (including the award-winning The Hollow Men) and the best-selling Slayer: An Unofficial and Unauthorised Guide to Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Inside Bartlets White House. He has written for many TV and genre magazines including Starburst and Shivers and is a former Contributing Editor of DreamWatch, specialising in coverage of US series such as Buffy, Angel, Stargate SG-1 and The West Wing.

Keith was born on sunny Tyneside on the same day in 1963 that his beloved Newcastle United lost 3-2 at home to Northampton Town.

Things have improved a bit since then.

He began his journalistic career whilst he was still working for the civil service (he has since escaped), writing for music, TV and football fanzines. He regularly appears on local radio and also contributed to the BBC television series I . the 70s.

He is currently co-scripting, with Martin Day, a proposed TV series for an independent production company. His hobbies include socialising with friends, foreign travel, very loud pop music, trashy British horror movies, current affairs and military history. His autobiography, Ive Had Her, will be published posthumously.